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**CYCLONES, SPECTACLES, AND CITIZENSHIP:  
THE POLITICIZATION OF NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE US AND OMAN**

A Dissertation Presented

By

Tyler Schuenemann

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2021

Department of Political Science



Cyclones, Spectacles, and Citizenship:  
The Politicization of Natural Disasters in the US and Oman

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CYCLONES, SPECTACLES, AND CITIZENSHIP: THE POLITICIZATION OF NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE US AND OMAN**

**FEBRUARY 2021**

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In the face of such complex, urgent threats of fires, floods, and increasingly powerful storms, many scholars warn that climate change puts us on the path to a technocratic, “rule of experts” for the sake of survival. Others warn that climate change will actually undermine the authority of governments, as they become increasingly unable to meet the basic needs of their citizens. In this dissertation, I draw from interviews, archival research, and ethnographic observations in the US and Oman to examine how power and historical context shape the way that these societies politicize natural disasters. These two countries have fundamental differences in terms of their state-society relations. Yet responses to recent tropical cyclones demonstrate that each country manifests similar contention in the face of disaster. Contemporary Americans and Omanis treat large-scale natural disasters as unplanned spectacles of interdependence, attention-grabbing symbols of their nation’s fate in an emergency. Officials and dissidents alike are seizing upon the public’s attention to these symbols, competing to anchor them to their own agendas. For example, disasters are treated as “revelations” about the legitimacy of government authorities, or “lessons” about public values other than safety from disaster, such as social justice and religious piety. Such disaster-contention in the US and Oman is a relatively new phenomena. It emerged in the early- and mid-twentieth century by virtue of the spread of new communication technologies that made it possible to conceive of “national emergencies,” and by an expanded vision for government and civic responsibility, making such emergencies problems for the government to solve. I argue that this record of contention shows that disasters are not partisan to technocratic order, nor are they conveyor belts to chaos. As the most attention-grabbing manifestations of climate change are treated as spectacles of interdependence, they provide opportunities for political entrepreneurs of many stripes, including nationalist and democratic movements that deride the rule of experts. The political consequences of climate change are therefore contingent upon the historically constructed nature of interpretive frameworks, like “citizenship” and “national emergency,” and how officials and dissidents utilize them to give political meaning to calamity.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Drought, famine, storms, fires, food and water shortages—climate scientists warn of a roster of dangers that will become increasingly frequent and more destructive in the years to come. Many social and political theorists are similarly dire in their own forecasts. In the face of such complex, urgent threats, they worry about the kinds of citizenship, political authority, and social relations that might follow. Can the dream of having political communities governed by a system of consultation, deliberation, and power-sharing among equals survive in an environment of constant emergency, wherein it appears necessary to take quick, decisive action for survival? What ideals and practices of citizenship are being made possible by calamities today, and what might this mean for democracy's future?

The political stakes of how we respond to disasters raises the following questions that I address in this dissertation. When large-scale disasters destroy life and property, how is this suffering and damage framed in public discourse as a problem for the political community to solve? How have such understandings and debates changed over time, such that, for example, it is only recently that ecological disasters became political spectacles through which the officials and dissidents fight over the proper role of government? What accounts for such changes? And what is at stake in the attempts by governments and dissidents to shape the public debate around disasters? What kinds of authority, values, and civic action do these actors seek to empower or undermine in the face of calamity?

In this dissertation, I contribute to this line of inquiry by providing empirically grounded analysis that investigates how political power and historical context shape the way that societies respond to calamity. My point of entry is to examine responses to calamities, especially “tropical cyclones”—a meteorological term that refers to the storms more commonly called hurricanes, cyclones, and typhoons, depending on the location of the storm. I study these responses through a paired comparison of Oman and the United States. These two countries have fundamental differences in terms of their state-society relations that would lead observers to expect little overlap in terms of political outcomes. Yet recent cyclones demonstrate that they nevertheless manifest similar contention around citizenship, particularly the capacity and value of state power in providing for the welfare and security of the national community.

This similarity between the US and Oman is puzzling because neither of the defining features of each regime-type’s legitimacy—popular sovereignty in the US, and traditional patronage in Oman—explain how authority is being held to account in these crises. Moreover, we cannot attribute this similarity to the disasters themselves, as if they momentarily blow away the political idiosyncrasies of each place. A historical analysis reveals that natural disasters did not trigger such state-centered contention in either country until the early- or mid-twentieth century. In this dissertation, I examine why these seemingly different countries came to look so similar in the aftermath of tropical cyclones, and argue that the answer to this question helps to highlight the political risks and opportunities that climate-related natural disasters make possible today.

## **Natural Disasters as Emergencies in Contention**

A group of scholars of contentious politics provide a helpful way into thinking about the kinds of unofficial political values, authority, and identity that are being mobilized in response to natural disasters. These works attempt to explain and later predict the capacity of natural disasters to generate political contention, instability, and hurt or bolster the popularity of political leaders. But as I describe below, there are problems and limits within their analysis.

The work of Drury and Olson has set the research agenda for much of this scholarship, which I will refer to as the “Maslowian approach.”<sup>1</sup> They argue that disasters can produce “Maslowian Shocks,” a phrase based on A.H. Maslow’s psychological model of the “hierarchy of human needs.”<sup>2</sup> According to the Maslowian model, natural disasters quickly generate a group of people with basic needs that are unmet, needs of which the state’s “primordial function” is to protect and provide relief when protection fails.

That is not to say that the Maslowians only see psychological needs driving politics. They also take into account the context of disasters and how governments respond. For example, they argue that media coverage of the disaster draws broader public attention to the destruction and the government’s capacity to provide for the

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<sup>1</sup> For examples, this includes Sarah Poggione, Vincent Gawronski, Gabriela Hoberman, and Richard Stuart Olson, “Public Response to Disaster Response: Applying the “5C+A” Framework to El Salvador 2001 and Peru 2007,” *International Studies Perspectives*, 13 (2012): 195-210; Richard Stuart Olson and Vincent Gawronski, “From Disaster Event to Political Crisis: a “5C+A” Framework for Analysis,” *International Studies Perspectives*, 11 (2010): 205-221; A. Cooper Drury and Richard Stuart Olson, “Disasters and Political Unrest: An empirical Investigation,” *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 6, no. 3 (1998): 153-161; Clair Apodaca, *State Repression in Post-Disaster Societies*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Olson and Gawronski, “From Disaster Event to Political Crisis,” 205-221.

victims. They also posit mediating variables derived from the political context of the disaster. Two of them make post-disaster unrest *more* likely: prior political unrest, because the preexisting grievances can be exasperated by the disaster, and high income inequality, because victims might be less confident that their needs will be met by the government on account of previous experiences with neglect. Other factors make unrest *less* likely, such as government repression and the availability of aid from the government or foreign agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the Maslowians see disasters generating contestation through the intersection of these psychological needs and the intervening variables that allow or prevent the government from meeting those needs. A “well-resourced and managed response” to a Maslowian Shock can generate popularity for the government, while the opposite can generate criticism, or even a political crisis. Hence, in their model, the bigger the disaster, the more likely it is to generate political unrest because of the power of unmet psychological needs.<sup>4</sup>

The Maslowian approach is helpful because it posits hypotheses for why disasters pose potential problems for state leaders. The lack of basic needs, such as food and shelter, as well as how media brings broader public expectations to bear on the state’s response to a disaster, are all important to consider. But their account has some internal tensions. On one hand, they take the problems to which people are responding and how

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in an apparent tautology, Drury and Olson also hold that “stable” democracies are the least likely to experience major unrest after a natural disaster. Drury and Olson, “Disasters and Political Unrest,” 159.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 153-161.

they are understood as a matter of fact. On the other hand, they emphasize the role of cultural differences and how people interpret their circumstances.

When Olson and Gawronski speak of social facts, they argue that the disaster lays bare to a public audience, “the actual values, qualities, and operational codes of the responding political leadership.” And that moment of truth can hurt or help the popularity of leaders, depending upon the quality of their performance. They also speak of “good management” and overall quality of leadership as social facts that disasters reveal. Moreover, their use of Maslow’s psychological categories for explaining how people hold the government accountable depicts a kind of universal, automatic process of human apprehension. The Maslowians thus appeal to a universal set of human needs and expectations of authority figures to explain the politicization of disasters across different kinds (e.g. floods and earthquakes), in different parts of the world (e.g. Nicaragua and China), and in different historical eras (e.g. the modern era and first-century BC).<sup>5</sup>

This appeal to the “bare facts” of the cases, and the presumably universal psychological needs of the disaster victims is in tension with the authors’ simultaneous attention to the importance of interpretative frameworks for explaining the politicization of disasters. For example, they note that public *expectations* of extraordinarily good conduct of public figures in times of crisis can be pivotal to a politician’s post-disaster report card. Moreover, when the authors applied their model in subsequent studies of earthquakes in El Salvador (2001) and Peru (2007), they found a lack of public concern

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<sup>5</sup> Apodaca’s recent work on the how disasters generate contention shows similar reasoning, but situated within the language of social contracts. In her version, everyone expects governments to protect people from natural disasters and to distribute recovery resources fairly. Hence, disasters generate contention by straining the ability of the standing authorities to fulfill this role. Apodaca, *State Repression in Post-Disaster Societies*, 2-4, 25-26.

over the extent to which the governments anticipated the earthquakes. In other words, one of the six dimensions that Olson and Gawronski had hypothesized to be universal features of public concern after a disaster was entirely absent. To their credit, they rightfully speculate that perhaps the “political culture” of El Salvador and Peru might have foreclosed this concern.<sup>6</sup>

For these reasons, the Maslowian approach is a helpful starting point because it utilizes the tools of comparative politics to generate several hypotheses about how political contention is generated out of natural disasters in different contexts. But in trying to explain why some disasters and not others generate a politicized response, their models point in two different directions. One direction resembles the errors of an earlier age of social science in which protest, rebellion, and other forms of contentious politics were explained as the automatic outcomes of psychological states, like mass rage, or of objectively measurable states of oppression or deprivation.<sup>7</sup> In this vision, a warming globe might indirectly generate political mobilization, as its disasters make more common the instance of government failure to provide enough food, medicine, and shelter to its citizens. Accordingly, the recalcitrance of human deprivation could lead to new political crises.

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<sup>6</sup> Poggione, Gawronski, Hoberman, and Olson, “Public Response to Disaster Response,” 207.

<sup>7</sup> Rod Aya, “Popular Intervention in Revolutionary Situations,” in *Statemaking and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 318-343, as cited in James C. Scott, “Resistance without Protest and without Organization: Peasant Opposition to the Islamic *Zakat* and the Christian Tithe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, no. 3 (1987), 418. For a critique of this model of social movement formation, see Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency: 1930-1970* (The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5-19; and Douglas McAdam, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 464-481.

The other, more productive direction in which their findings point is to examine the production of public meaning in the aftermath of disasters. Even if there are universal psychological forces at work, they nevertheless appear to be mediated by an interpretive process that is not universal. This variation includes, for example, understandings of what governments are capable of doing, and therefore what they are responsible for in a disaster's aftermath. One does not have to look beyond the US for cases wherein these understandings vary significantly. Consider President Truman. He had himself filmed for newsreels flying over the floods that devastated Texas in 1951, showcasing his concern and his working with "experts" who were managing the disaster.<sup>8</sup> A year later, the same President mocked a reporter who asked him what he would do about a drought threatening the Mid-West: "What can I do? I can't make it rain." Rather than respond with outrage at his lack of compassion or plan of action, the press core laughed and moved on to other topics.<sup>9</sup> Juxtaposing the levity of that exchange to seriousness of Truman's PR campaign during the Texas floods a year earlier indicates that in this context, there was no clear expectation of the state's so-called "primordial function" in the face of disaster. Other scholars of the history of disasters and the American presidency have similarly described a high degree of variability in expectations of state responses to disaster.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> British Pathe, "Truman sees US Flood (1951)," YouTube Video, 1:19, April 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z41ILqvQKK8>, 6/12/2018.

<sup>9</sup> Harry S. Truman, "The President's News Conference Online," ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/230951>.

<sup>10</sup> Gareth Davies, "Introduction: The American Politics of Disaster from the Civil War to the Present," *Journal of Policy History*, 26, no. 3 (2014), 299-304; and Gareth Davies, "The Changing Presidential Politics of Disaster: From Coolidge to Nixon," in *New Historical Approaches to the American*



Such variety in understanding disasters and authority demands an account of how the interpretive process of meaning-making mediates the politics of ecological emergencies. This process should be the starting point for grasping the kinds of political and social ties impelled by climate change. Rather than appealing to a model of contention based upon universal psychological drives, the political consequences of climate change are best explored in processes of public meaning making, and the historical and political forces that shape it.

### **An Interpretivist Approach to the Politics of Natural Disasters**

I take an interpretivist approach to the study of the politics of natural disasters. Interpretivism is an alternative epistemology for social inquiry which holds that people's experience of the social world is constituted by the symbols and concepts through which they think, perceive, and communicate. Rather than appealing to innate psychological drives and social facts, this approach examines how actors make their world intelligible by assigning meaning, and how power shapes this process in different contexts. For example, the criteria people use to judge their leaders change over time. Moreover, what counts as compassion, attentiveness, generosity, or competence, to cite some criteria that the Maslowians presume, is produced by historical configurations of power, and can vary widely across cases and time. Crucially, meaning can also vary within cases, wherein

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*Presidency*, ed. Brian Balogh and Bruce Schulman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 233-249.

there are battles to define the concepts or principles to which people appeal.<sup>11</sup> The work of an interpretivist is to document these processes of meaning-making and to show their effects, such as the kinds of debates or institutions that they make possible.

Other scholars who have created a kind of theoretical infrastructure upon which I am building my interpretive approach to the study of natural disasters. A group of scholars I will refer to as “moral economists,” many of whom inspired the later interpretivist turn in social science, help explain how ecological calamities have contributed to political contestation. They focus on famine, or “subsistence crises,” in pre-modern Agrarian societies.<sup>12</sup> That is, prior to modern states and capitalism, during a time when most of the world’s population lived as subsistence farmers, drought, flooding, pestilence, and other hazards could lead to anger, resistance, or out-right rebellion against authorities. But not always. The fundamental insight of the moral economists is that having a bunch of hungry or starving people was not enough to cause collective contestation. Sometimes people starved quietly, or fled the area. Other times, contestation could escalate, “bread riots” or revolutions being extreme examples of a larger field of resistance and contestation.

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<sup>11</sup> On the study of everyday language in politics, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); and Frederic Charles Schaffer, *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*, (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2016). For interpretivism more broadly, see Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> This includes works such as Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1944). E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, 50 (1971): 76-136; and James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

Scott convincingly shows that the politicization of these famines occurred when there was a shared perception of *exploitation* under conditions of famine, and what counts as exploitation was context-specific.<sup>13</sup> Contention emerged when groups of people thought that they were suffering unnecessarily because elites took too much of their crop yield. What counted as necessary and unnecessary suffering was built around what moral economists call the “subsistence ethic,” a set of expectations commonly held by peasants that tax collectors would leave them with enough food to survive.<sup>14</sup> Famine-causing disasters would not trigger contestation if the authorities adjusted their taxes, taking less and leaving peasants with what appeared to be their fair share given the circumstances. However, if the collectors took what was seen as too much, it would generate collective sentiments of injustice, of exploitation, and contestation would often follow. It was a violation of pre-established expectations of reciprocity in the distribution of resources that helped generate contention, not an aggregation of hunger pangs. In other words, it was a “cultural” shock, not a “Maslowian” one. The moral economy literature shows the pay-off of looking and listening, not presuming, in order to document how collective meaning-making shapes the politics of disaster.

But I am also extending the interpretive analysis of natural disasters beyond the findings and insights of the moral economy literature to help make sense of something new. Much of the moral economy literature was developed to explain contestation within

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<sup>13</sup> In Scott’s later work, he examines a broader universe of grievances outside the context of famine. See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 13-34.

relatively stagnant social, economic, and political systems that no longer exist.<sup>15</sup> As I discuss below, the contemporary societies that I examine here are no longer defined by agrarian relations and their corresponding insecurities of survival vis-à-vis nature, and a minimal agrarian state. States today no longer act as simply taxers with minimal policing of the public order. State practices are much more varied and intimately involved in the daily lives of the people that they rule over, in ways that bear directly on natural disasters. Hence, exploitation through over-taxation is but one of many ways in which state representatives can draw the ire of their subjects. As a consequence, the range of expectations for authority figures after a disaster is much more diverse and contested today.

A growing number of historians are examining the longitudinal changes of how disasters have been interpreted in a variety of countries, including the United States. These scholars tend to emphasize a distinction between “pre-modern” and “modern” disasters in Western societies and their colonies. Crucial to the distinction between pre-modern and modern is whether natural events are perceived as being driven by supernatural, often divine forces, or by mechanistic laws of nature. Different conceptions of human-, and later state-, responsibility follow from each interpretation. For example, when Russell R. Dynes argues that the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 was the first “modern disaster,” he emphasizes how it was the first major disaster in which a cohort of powerful

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<sup>15</sup> James Scott’s work departed from this agrarian focus in his later publication of *Weapons of the Weak*, which examined a community transitioning into a mechanizing, capitalist agricultural system. In this work, he abandons the term “moral economy” to refer to this set of shared expectations, and instead speaks of a shared “ethos.” For example, see Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 190-198. However, he later returns to the concept to speak of resistance in non-agrarian contexts. See Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 58.

men insisted that it be treated as the outcome of “natural” causes, implementing a reconstruction effort that took these natural laws into consideration. By conceiving of natural disasters as the calculable risks of living on a hazard-filled planet, these men sought to mitigate or even control such threats through better knowledge of when and where these hazards occur, applying new technology and engineering strategies.<sup>16</sup>

Following this modernizing account, other historians have elaborated on how this risk-focused interpretation of disasters brought with it new understandings of state-society relations. Here is how Davidson describes this change as it occurred in the context of the colonial Americas:

In political terms, this [change] implied a shift of power from the church to the state: whereas the church had formerly been charged with assuaging the threat of disaster, the government became responsible for calculating and managing the risks it posed.<sup>17</sup>

Davidson is describing a revolutionary shift in politics. With the new scientific understanding of causality came with it a corresponding demand for the state to take up the mantle as public guardian, mastering nature for the common good. Some representatives of this modernizing story go so far as to argue that the consequence has been that disasters no longer carry with them moral or political meaning, that for all but the super-religious, disasters are seen as “random, morally inert phenomena.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Russell R. Dynes, “The Lisbon Earthquake in 1755: Contested Meanings in the First Modern Disaster,” *University of Delaware Disaster Research Centre*, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Anderson, *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 15-16. Anderson is drawing from the historical narratives of the emergence of risk-based governance in Europe, citing Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: a Sociological Theory*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Ted Steinburg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (New York City: NY, Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii.

This literature is helpful in highlighting the importance of a new framework for thinking about how humans can better control nature through the use of science, technology, and the engineering of nature and humans, which I will expand upon below. However, the problem with this modernizing account is that it flattens the plurality of interpretations and interventions into disasters, both in the “pre-modern” and “modern” era, and therefore does not capture the kinds of political opportunities that disasters provide today. “Pre-modern” Europe and Latin America, for example, were filled with astrologists, witches, sorcerers, soothsayers, shaman, and lay priests, all offering different interpretations of the causes of calamity and venues for agency: spells, incantations, talismans, prayers, and fasting were common ones.<sup>19</sup> So it is true that supernatural mechanisms for good health or a good afterlife were common in this era. The precarious material conditions made magic, providence, and prophecy attractive avenues through which people could find meaning. However, no one held a monopoly over the narrative or the responsibility to provide such security. It is an exaggeration to say that modernization involved the church handing its monopoly over to the state.

As I show in subsequent chapters, just as there was no single actor perceived to be responsible for pre-modern disasters, neither is there one for “modern” disasters today. The emergence of secular interpretations of disasters has pointed to several possible solutions to these hazards. People regularly attribute some immediate, material cause to a disaster, citing the mechanics of the atmosphere after a hurricane, for example. But this

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<sup>19</sup> On Europe, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, (New York City, NY: Penguin Books, 1971). On Latin America, see Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

understanding has not rendered disasters “morally or spiritually inert.” People regularly hold the two visions of disasters at once: they see disasters as problems of nature, like a large-scale accident. But they also are capable of “zooming out” to attribute a broader political or even cosmic meaning to these events. Thus, what we see today is a field of contestation to define how much security in the face of natural disasters is possible, to what extent state power is capable of providing it, and to mobilize people behind those narratives.<sup>20</sup>

### **Research Design**

My original plan for the dissertation was to write about contentious politics in Oman, and use the response to Cyclone Gonu as a case study. But the more I studied the cultural battles being waged in that case, the more I saw similarities between Oman and what I had already examined in the United States. As I will show in subsequent chapters, in both countries state leaders and other officials are subject to criticism in the public sphere in the aftermath of natural disasters, wherein political entrepreneurs seek to anchor the meaning of the destruction to a larger political message that calls into question their rule, and the values through which it is justified. In response to these and anticipated attacks, governments similarly use the spectacle of the disaster to justify their own ideological punch-lines. Some of this contention invokes the values of technocratic authority, but also appeals to less tangible features of “national character,” such as “strength” or “honor” in the face of forces that experts cannot contain.

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<sup>20</sup> I provide a brief summary of this contestation in the section titled, “Summary of Argument,” while the subsequent chapters provide more in-depth case-studies.

This overlap between Oman and the US was originally puzzling to me.

According to the prevailing social science literature, Oman and the United States are radically different in terms of their political and cultural institutions. Oman is a recently unified (1950s) and independent (1970s) nation-state. Scholars normally categorize it as having a rentier economy based on hydrocarbon deposits, which the government uses to fund development projects and buy loyalty from citizens by paying salaries to a large public sector. The country is ruled by a semi-theocratic Sultan with absolute power. He is not beholden to elections, nor does he have any domestic competitors to appease or compete with for popularity. The regime maintains heavy restrictions on free speech and political organizing. The relationship between the Omani citizens and the state is thus commonly defined by a kind of patronage. The Sultan is praised as a good leader because he is purportedly a wise and generous patron to his subjects, using the hydrocarbon wealth for the good of all Omanis.<sup>21</sup> The government is not, in other words, there to facilitate popular sovereignty and maintain a relatively free market economy, as it is in the United States. Indeed, Americans are taught to pursue their livelihood by competing for jobs, and to think about their membership within the nation-state as democratic citizens, where their political leaders are obligated to represent their will and allow for popular and free participation in public debates, elections, even activism. If

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<sup>21</sup> These readings of Omani politics are addressed in further detail in other chapters. They are represented in the works of J.E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy*, (London, UK: Saqi, 2007). Marc Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Jennifer S. Hunt, "The Late Unpleasantness: The Arab Spring in Oman," in *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States*, ed. May Seikaly and Khawla Mattar, (Berlin, DE: Gerlach Press, 2014).



these models of state-society relations are so different, then why have Americans and Omanis recently politicized cyclones so similarly?

I investigate this question by deploying two kinds of comparison. The longitudinal contrasts of disaster politics within each country, i.e. the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 vs Hurricane Katrina in 2005, help to denaturalize the kinds of conflicts that disasters give rise to today. Noticing the peculiarity of the present in comparison to the past demonstrates a change that is of great political consequence, and it gives us clues as to when and where to look for an explanation for this change. I will argue that the emergence of two frameworks for understanding disasters in the twentieth-century helps explain what we are seeing today in both the US and Oman. Denaturalizing the present through longitudinal comparison also helps us notice underlying possibilities for the future, as such political formations continue to change. As these changes are subject to human influence, it may even help us see opportunities to shape that future. In short, the historical comparisons help us to see the strangeness of where we are, to investigate how we got here, and to think about where we might go next.

The cross-case comparison, juxtaposing the history of the US with that of Oman, helps expand this “we,” demonstrating that these changes are not unique to any one country or political system. So while the longitudinal comparisons help to “de-naturalize” our world, the cross-case comparison helps to “de-exceptionalize” it.<sup>22</sup> The overlapping parts of each country’s story help me generate analytical tools for understanding the forces at work, elucidating how they operated in different contexts, and

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<sup>22</sup> For a similar use of both longitudinal and cross-case comparison to draw insights from two very different countries, see Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).

yet produced similar results. A big part of my story here is that the processes that made such politicization possible have traveled to different parts of the world, for example, through imperialism. These findings allow me to generate analytic concepts for thinking about what *constitutes* the similar phenomena under question, and what changes helped to put those constitutive elements in place.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, it suggests alternative analytic categories that correct the more prominent ones in other scholarship, such as the universalist, psychological framework of other analyses of disaster contention, and the “othering,” regime-type frameworks that obscure what is shared across contemporary democratic and authoritarian polities.<sup>24</sup> These concepts might provide useful suggestions of how to interpret, compare, and explain disaster politics in other cases, if only as a starting point.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thus, a big part of my “causal” argument appeals to what interpretivists call “constitutive causation,” which explains phenomena by documenting “how humans conceive of their worlds... which make[s] possible or impossible the interactions they pursue.” See Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2012), 51-53. For helpful discussions of other approaches to causality, including positivist and non-positivist approaches, see Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2011), 111; Charles Tilly, “Mechanisms in Political Processes,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001): 21-41.

<sup>24</sup> While much of the discussion of the relevance of regime types to disasters focuses on which regimes are “better” at providing aid and mitigation, there are some scholars who have argued that regime-type significantly shapes the kinds of political contests that attend disasters. For an example of the former, see Alastair Smith and Alejandro Quiroz Flores, “Why Natural Disasters Rock Democracies Less,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 15, 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2010-07-15/disaster-politics>. For the latter, see Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China’s Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 40-41; and Rutherford H. Platt, *Disasters and Democracy: the Politics of Extreme Natural Events*, (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> On the distinction between analytic and empirical claims, as well as the different kinds of “generalizability” in social science, see Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, 112-153. On the use of comparative ethnography to critique established categories of analysis, see Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, “The Case for Comparative Ethnography,” *Comparative Politics*, 51, no. 3 (2019): 341-359.

It might help to clarify here that I do not conclude from these findings that such processes will generate a similar kind of disaster politics everywhere. As I juxtapose the US and Oman, I am not engaging in what is often referred to in political science as a positivist, “most-different” comparison. Such studies seek to compare cases that differ in most ways but for the variables under scrutiny, so as to isolate them and test their causal relationship—mimicking as much as possible the controls of a scientific lab.<sup>26</sup> The purpose of my study is not to discover, test, or prove a generalizable theory of causality. I agree with a number of scholars who hold that the effects of such changes are indeterminate, varying according to context.<sup>27</sup> Those interested in understanding other cases would have to *look*, not infer from my study, in order to discover whether a similar story could be told elsewhere.

I approach these comparisons by documenting and analyzing the interpretive processes through which disasters are given meaning. I do so by focusing on the discourse of citizenship and natural disasters. I track the words, images, and narratives that are deployed to communicate and debate what natural disasters are, what dangers they pose, what can be done about them, and who is responsible for addressing them. The sites of this discourse occur in a variety of settings in both countries. I make use of public media, ethnographic observations, online discussion forums, records of volunteer

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<sup>26</sup> On this strategy of paired comparison, see John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, (New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139-142; and Sidney Tarrow, “The Strategy of Paired Comparison: Toward a Theory of Practice,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 43, no. 2 (2010): 230-259. For an analysis of the neo-positivist assumptions behind this approach, see Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, 69-71.

<sup>27</sup> Tilly, “Mechanisms in Political Processes,” 25.

groups meetings, archived oral history projects, as well as official documents and statements from government officials and aid agencies.

While most of the data I work with are documents, I do occasionally make use of interviews that I conducted in both countries with people involved with government institutions and non-governmental agencies, as well as everyday people who experienced some of the climate-related disasters I will be analyzing. When possible, I also integrate some of my own ethnographic observations of civilian and government responses to Hurricane Sandy in New York City (2012), which I documented while attending meetings and workshops of an activist and recovery group, “Occupy Sandy.” I also integrate my observations of responses to Cyclone Chapala (2015) which grazed Oman during my ten-months of field research in the country, most of which was spent in Muscat, but included multiple, extended trips to the interior, the south (Salalah), and Masirah Island.

My positionality shaped what original data I was able to document, and how I represent that information here. So some transparency about my role in that process might help the reader judge my forthcoming claims.<sup>28</sup> There was a lot that I did not get to see and hear, and therefore document, because of who I am. There were archives, events, and social spaces from which I was excluded because I am a male, non-Muslim, non-Omani.<sup>29</sup> But my positionality also opened doors in ways that were generative to

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<sup>28</sup> On the role of reflexivity in allowing readers to judge the findings of interpretivist research, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretive Research Design*, 100-104.

<sup>29</sup> For example, I was in the coastal city of Salalah as Cyclone Chapala was approaching in October 2015. A contact had brought me to his neighborhood to show me the civilian-run relief effort that was organizing evacuations and gathering food, water, and other supplies to distribute after the storm made landfall. After the organizers gave me a friendly, formal welcoming and briefly explained their efforts,

data-collection. My credentials and prestigious scholarship likely helped me gain a “permission slip” for conducting research in Oman from the National Center for Statistics and Information, which gave me some footing within the bureaucratic hierarchies of the Omani government when requesting access to research materials or interviews with officials. My university affiliations also likely helped connect me with Omani officials and intellectuals who were excited to talk at length about Omani politics and economics in informal settings, and get my feedback on their own research and writing.

Moreover, my nationality and being open about my own left-wing politics and activist background seems to have gained me access to spaces and discussions that other researchers might not have enjoyed. For example, a number of Omani civilians I spoke with in private explained to me that as an “outsider,” I was more “open minded” than other Omanis, and so they were willing to discuss sensitive social and political issues with me that they would not have with their neighbors or family members. In the US, it was quite easy for me to access the meeting spaces of Occupy Sandy, a group that was organizing aid projects after Hurricane Sandy (2012) New York City. This ease of access was likely because I knew one of the more prominent activists in the group from my own participation in “Occupy” activism the year prior. Moreover, from my experience I was aware of what to do, and what not to do, in their spaces in order to remain welcome. For example, knowing how to participate in a “spokes council” group discussion, and taking

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they quickly arranged for someone to drive me home. I was being quickly ushered away from a scene that I wanted to stay and observe. When I asked to stay for their meeting, they informed me that I was not allowed in: It was occurring in their Mosque, and I am not a Muslim. My subsequent efforts to meet or speak with these volunteers were met with polite rebuffs or silence. This failed attempt at access prevented me from spending enough time with the group to understand what they were doing, and for that reason, I was unable to include their perspective in my account.

initiative to help clean and organize the meeting and eating spaces, were all practices that were obvious to me from past experience. In this way, my positionality allowed me to take ethnographic notes, conduct interviews, and eventually, be given access to the group's archive of internal communications.

The documents and original data that I examine here do not provide a *comprehensive* representation of how individual Americans and Omanis understand disasters and their larger significance. No doubt, such understandings would be infinitely varied. Moreover, there is no all-seeing, objective perspective from which to document such things. Silences are thus an inevitable feature of representing the world in social inquiry.<sup>30</sup> Rather than an exhaustive account of experiences and voices, I am documenting and analyzing processes of public meaning-making, those discourses and practices that shape how people and institutions seek to give collective meaning to disasters, and at times, mobilize that narrative for larger goals, such as contesting the status-quo. These discourses are constituted by the concepts, images, narratives, and institutions used to address disasters in public.<sup>31</sup> My task is to identify patterns within public communication, points of contestation, the contexts of both, and then compare them in the way I have described above.

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory*, 16, no. 1 (1998): 23.

<sup>31</sup> Here I am borrowing from Berlant's concept of the rhetoric of citizenship. See Laura Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, (London, UK: Duke University Press, 1997), 10.

## Summary of Argument

This dissertation advances three interrelated arguments. First, it is a mistake to interpret the disasters of today as merely material phenomena that destroy or kill, to be overcome or managed by volunteerism and statecraft. Contemporary Americans and Omanis treat large-scale natural disasters as symbolic phenomena that teach, reveal, or test important features of the political community. Like public ceremonies, rituals, and spectacles, we see citizens and officials making disasters into a theater of power in which the value of public figures, institutions, and political values can be enhanced or undermined. But contrary to how scholars have described these other public events, disasters-cum-spectacles are not choreographed and scripted ahead of time with the purpose of conveying a single idea or feeling.<sup>32</sup> As disasters arrive seemingly from “outside” at the behest of no one, they are unplanned spectacles to which political

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<sup>32</sup> Prominent approaches to studying the choreographed and political nature of public rituals, ceremonies, and spectacles include those inspired by Clifford Geertz, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault. Geertzian approaches tend to treat rituals and ceremonies as events with shared meanings, at times choreographed to enhance the status of rulers. Neo-Durkheimian and neo-Marxist approaches view these events as mechanisms that uphold the status quo, whether through the production of consensus and fellow-feeling, or through manipulative socialization. In contrast, Foucauldian approaches do not presume that the meaning of these events is shared, nor do they presume their effect. They instead examine the competing, sometimes ambiguous systems of meaning and their indeterminate effects. Examples of the Geertzian approach include Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’, c 1820-1977,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 101-164. For neo-Durkheimian approaches, see Sidney Verba, “The Kennedy Assassination and the Nature of Political Commitment,” in *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public*, ed. E. Parker and B. Greensberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 348-360; and McKim Marriott, “Cultural Policy in the New States,” in *Old Societies and New States: the Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1963), 27-56. For neo-Marxist approaches, see Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263-307; and Steven Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration,” *Sociology*, 9, no. 2 (1975): 289-308. For Foucauldian approaches, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York City, NY: Random House, 1995), 3-69; and Lisa Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

entrepreneurs compete to give public meaning. Dissidents seize upon the public's attention to the destruction and suffering in order to put their governments on trial and justify alternative, critical understandings of the status-quo in light of the disaster. As officials respond, what follows is a framing contest, wherein actors compete to anchor the meaning of the spectacle to some broader political conclusion.<sup>33</sup> It is through these contests that the most tangible manifestations of global warming are given meaning in public discourse.

Common themes of debate emerge in these contests over the political spectacle. Rather than apolitical appeals to expertise, dissidents raise concerns that the destruction represents some larger injustice: to whom are the technocrats accountable? Did they do a good enough job? Did they serve everyone equally? Moreover, dissidents are not exclusively calling for the technocrats to "meet the needs" of disaster victims. They direct the project of recovery to some good beyond returning to the status quo, attempting to make the emergency an opportunity for citizens to become, or participate in, something greater than oneself. Ennobled is a mode of citizenship that means one is actively participating in making things better, in a way that is not scripted by officials and experts.

In both countries, these challenges to officials and their narratives carry enough significance that official actors, including heads of state, are compelled to respond. Sometimes they denounce these attacks, other times they attempt to appropriate them,

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<sup>33</sup> On framing and framing contests, see Robert D. Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000): 611-639; and Francesca Polletta, "Culture and Movements," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 619, (2008): 78-96. To clarify, although I am borrowing some analytic concepts from this literature, I am not utilizing them to explain the success or failure of social movement mobilization.



making images of laypeople responding to calamity as an embodiment of the national spirit, or stories of religious piety as complimentary to the national order. In doing so, they appeal to peddle two different framings at once. The first renders the government as a responsive technocratic institution, treating the disaster as the outcome of manageable environmental forces. The second renders the disaster as a surprising, uncontrollable event during which spontaneous acts of the state and civilians, experts and laymen, come together in heroic fashion to address the calamity.

Thus, contrary to the claims of some scholars, disasters spark contestation that goes beyond material concerns of meeting basic needs and playing “hot potato” with who or what is to blame.<sup>34</sup> My analysis shows that states must attempt to use their symbolic power to intervene in the process through which people understand disasters in public venues. Hence, representatives of the American and Omani governments respond to natural disasters in the form of a political campaign to recuperate the public image that the disaster harmed. They advertise both the technical capacity of the disaster response agencies (FEMA/military), the leadership of the head of state (President/Sultan), and the national solidarity and agency of the victims and volunteers. Similar to how scholars have shown that states attempt to use public rituals, ceremonies, and spectacles to consolidate power, disasters are being made into theaters of power wherein dissidents and officials compete in the production of public meaning.

Second, I argue that such disaster-contention is not natural, universal, and static, but plural and historically constructed by specific arrangements of power that we see

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<sup>34</sup> For example, see Sheldon Ungar, “Moral Panic Versus the Risk Society: the Implications of the Changing Sites of Social Anxiety,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 52, no. 1 (2001): 273-276.

today. I establish this claim by showing that contemporary disaster-contention in both the US and Oman is a relatively new phenomena to which states now have to respond. This variance over time is clear evidence that it is a mistake to appeal to universal, unchanging variables such as our innate psychological responses to disaster or a pre-determined role of the state as the guardian of our basic needs. Rather, the contention is made possible by historical changes in how people think about human suffering, what can be done to address it, and who is responsible for doing so.

One of these changes is the emergence of “national emergency” as a discursive framework. Understanding disasters as “national emergencies” means that they are abrupt deviations from the nation’s normal times that demand urgent intervention.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to a tragedy, which locates the harm in the past, and therefore finished, emergencies emphasize the here-and-now, demanding quick action. This way of understanding disasters is particular to societies that have access to news in real-time. The telegraph, newspapers, and radio made it possible for this information to travel quickly, allowing national audiences to learn of the emergencies befalling their fellow citizens living in different parts of the country. Such an awareness of collective suffering happening “meanwhile” allowed them to contemplate their relationship to these urgent problems as they happened, and how they might intervene in them.<sup>36</sup> Thus, with this

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<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, Birkland conceptualizes disasters as potential “focusing events,” whose sudden shocks can change the policy agendas of government by drawing attention to, and shift the priority of, different policy problems. I do not adopt his framework because it restricts the level of analysis to official policymaking, and does not account for the logic of urgency that characterizes many of the non-state mobilizations in the face of disaster. See Thomas A. Birkland, *Lessons of Disaster: Policy Change after Catastrophic Events*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> My conceptualization of national emergencies is indebted to several scholars who have tracked the political effects of modern conceptions of time, especially Benedict Anderson and Craig Calhoun. Anderson illustrates how the notion of “meanwhile,” made possible in part by print capitalism, helps to

technology in place, “national emergencies” became part of the discursive repertoire of public discussion, a way for local and national actors to understand disasters.<sup>37</sup>

Parallel to this shift in thinking about time was the emergence of a new way of thinking about citizenship. Liberal theorists often use “citizenship” to refer to one’s membership status in a political community that is distinct from being the “subject” of a political ruler. Here, being a citizen means one enjoys a specific set of rights as an agent within a political community, for example, preserving one’s right to free speech or the right to representative government.<sup>38</sup> But citizenship is often more than just a legal status that shapes what rights and responsibilities members have vis-à-vis each other and their government. It is a set of identities and practices that are subject to change and

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constitute nationalist imaginaries. Calhoun shows how a more specific, urgent understanding of “meanwhile” also emerged with new communication technologies; he calls this understanding the “emergency imaginary.” But I refer to a “national emergency” in a way that is distinct from his “emergency imaginary” in two ways. First, because he is analyzing the proliferation of international humanitarian institutions in Europe in the 1970s, Calhoun is conceiving of emergencies as international, distant events. As such, these interventions are top-down, bureaucratic, and carried out by foreign actors: emergency intervention is typically carried out by “the first world,” for “the third world.” His level of analysis is international. Thus he is not considering how the logic of emergencies play out in other contexts. Indeed, as I show in later chapters, emergencies are often addressed by local and national, not international actors, and are therefore shaped by context-specific conceptions of citizenship. Moreover, by jettisoning the assumption that international humanitarian actors are making the intervention, one *cannot* assume that a national emergency contains an explicitly anti-political ideology of short-term problem-solving, as Calhoun does. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York City, NY: Verso, 2006); Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order,” in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, ed. Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolif, (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2013) 29-58.

<sup>37</sup> For a helpful discussion of how such “discursive repertoires” structure how political entrepreneurs engage in framing contests, see Marc W. Steinberg, “Tilting the Frame: Considerations on Collective Action Framing from a Discursive Turn,” *Theory and Society*, 27, no. 6 (1998): 856-862.

<sup>38</sup> This conception of the citizen has its modern origins in the work of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. See Melissa S. Williams, “Citizenship as Agency within Communities of Shared Fate,” in *Unsettled Legitimacy: Political Community, Power, and Authority in a Global Era*, ed. Steven Bernstein and William D. Coleman, (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 33-52.

contestation outside of formal institutions.<sup>39</sup> Often times, states or civil society actors mobilize to enact or demand new responsibilities or new rights vis-à-vis their fellow citizens or their government. They also mobilize to change the meaning of old rights and responsibilities, and how they are implemented in practice.<sup>40</sup> As Margaret Sommers puts it, “citizenship is a ‘contested truth’—its meaning political and historical constructed.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, both “citizenship,” as distinct from “subject,” and the particular constellation of identities and practices that define it, are constructions that are subject to change and contestation.

A central part of my argument is that a similar construction of citizenship gained prominence in both the US and Oman in the twentieth century, helping to make disasters into political spectacles over which different groups would fight to give meaning. Both bottom-up and top-down forces in these countries mobilized to make political membership about the collective pursuit of safety in the face of sudden collective suffering. In part, what it meant to be an American or Omani citizen was increasingly understood as being able to enjoy a certain amount of protection from forces outside of

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<sup>39</sup> Janine Brodie, “The Social in Social Citizenship,” in *Recasting the Social in Citizenship*, ed. Engin F. Isin (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, 2008), 20-43.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-39.

<sup>41</sup> For example, the liberal emphasis on agency has its historical roots in the European Enlightenment and its focus on emancipation from despotic rulers. See Margaret Sommers, “Rights, Relationality, and Membership: Rethinking the Making and Meaning of Citizenship,” *Law & Social Inquiry*, 19, no. 2 (1994): 65. Others point out that specific patriarchal and racial institutions in early America shaped early conceptions of citizenship there. For example, the dignity afforded to those who could vote and be paid for their work was used as a social distinction, putting white men over slaves and women. See Judith Sklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 402-409.

one's control, and to expect aid from one's fellow citizens and government when disaster did strike.

This development was not specific to natural disasters, but part of broader changes to the ideas and practices of citizenship. The history of the shifting discourse of citizenship is too long to address here. What concerns me is how social movements and government institutions increasingly came to associate membership within a political community with the capacity to enjoy a certain standard of life, including access to things like education, health care, and financial support when necessary.<sup>42</sup> This discourse of citizenship emerged as a way to think about disasters in the US and Oman through processes that were in many ways unique to each country. In the US, the federal government was founded with a constitutional duty to look out for the "general welfare" of the nation, occasionally used to justify the provision of aid to disaster victims. But it would not be until the twentieth century that disasters became sites of political spectacle, as Progressives and later New Dealers increasingly used the public provision of aid to justify their rule.

Similar discourses of citizenship and their relevance to disasters emerged more rapidly in Oman. Anti-colonial forces were chasing the British out of the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century, singing of modernization and independence. In Oman, this

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<sup>42</sup> It therefore is closely related to what Thomas H. Marshall conceptualizes as "social citizenship." Here is how he put it: "By the social element I mean the whole range, from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services..." See Thomas H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1950). For challenges and appraisals of Marshall's account, see Margaret R. Sommers, "Rights, Relationality, and Membership," 63-112; and Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "Civil Citizenship Against Social Citizenship? On the Ideology of Contract-Versus-Charity," in *The Condition of Citizenship*, ed. Bart van Steenberg (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1994), 90-107.

anti-colonialism took the form of the Dhofar Rebellion (1962-1976). British colonial officers responded by implementing state- and nation-building projects in Oman. These projects were premised on the idea that development would win the loyalty of Omanis to the British-backed Sultan. The result of their attempt to put down the rebels is that the Omani political system was constructed by the British to emulate the citizenship frameworks of Western industrialized countries, but without the other so-called “political” or “civil” aspects of citizenship that might give Omanis a say in who rules over them, and therefore undermine the power of the British-backed Sultan.

What these origin stories have in common is that in both cases we see movements and initiatives that established the American and Omani state as an entity that increasingly intervenes in how people live, with the goal of providing security and welfare to the national population. In both countries, political entrepreneurs seized upon this understanding of the state, using it as a sort of campaign promise to support their rise to power. For FDR and his allies, it was “the New Deal;” for Sultan Qaboos and his cohort, it was “the renaissance” (*al nahda*). The success of these entrepreneurs helped to establish a new model of citizenship. It attached the symbolic capital of political leaders to their ability to maintain a buffer between civilians and the economic and ecological forces that inflict sudden collective devastation—what Franklin Delano Roosevelt once called, “the hazards and vicissitudes of life.” While later neoliberal movements have helped dial back some of the promises of the New Deal or the *nahda*, protecting citizens from calamity remains a politically resonant understanding of what the state is responsible for in both countries. Thus, much like how moral economists point to the “subsistence ethic” as shaping whether and how disasters resulted in contestation in

agrarian societies, I am highlighting how a new vision of citizenship does so in the US and Oman today.

It is the historical convergence between the new ways of thinking about human suffering, through the lens of national emergency and citizenship, that explains why only recently we see disasters being made into unplanned political spectacles over which dissidents and officials compete to give meaning. National emergencies put on display in dramatic fashion the capacity for these states to fulfill what are only recently perceived to be their new duties in the face of disaster. The spectacle of technocratic failure in the face of emergency is a new, symbolically powerful picture of a broken social contract. Nothing about this formation in the US and Oman is natural, necessary, or inevitable. It is the peculiar character of our contexts.

The third argument follows from the previous two. Scholars and activists alike should recognize the political potentials and dangers that lie in natural disasters. History tells us not just how we got to a place where such different countries share similar politics today, but that our future is open to change.<sup>43</sup> De-naturalizing these post-disaster contests provides an invitation to consider how these formations will continue to change, and the opportunities and dangers that lie therein. We should read post-disaster contention as a series of experiments and struggles to popularize new ways of thinking about who we

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<sup>43</sup> Here, I am indebted to Foucault's work on genealogy. For his comments on the "liberatory" elements of genealogy, see Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 164; and Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, (New York City, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82-84. For helpful assessments of Foucault's approach and its liberatory goals, see Mark Bevir, "What is Genealogy?" *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2, (2008): 272; and Arnold I. Davidson, "Foucault and the Analysis of Concepts," in *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 188-189.

are, who or what we can look to in the face of calamity, and the kind of world we want to build on top of the debris. The resonant depictions of national vulnerability in the media and in the streets, along with the attempts to address it collectively, instigate contests wherein political entrepreneurs find opportunities to frame the emergency toward a larger political project, putting pressure on the state to intervene in this framing contest.

Recognizing this field of contestation allows us to see the humanitarian framing, the drive to return things back to “normal,” is one among many competing ways of problematizing calamity. Rather than just holding states accountable to a pre-existing social contract, like the duty to provide for basic needs in the face of calamity, these mobilizations are spaces for political and social action that is unscripted. As global warming makes disasters more frequent and destructive, and we are confronted with more scenes of human suffering and ecological destruction, the political spectacle of disaster is an opening for political experimentation and mobilization.

Global warming has not put us on a conveyor belt to a technocratic rule of experts. As Rozario noted, hopes for social progress do not automatically create a uniform citizenry of optimistic citizens willing to give their fate over to experts and political authorities.<sup>44</sup> Along with proponents of science and technocratic rule, such hopes also produce critics, skeptics, and ambivalent people. This broader universe of critique, skepticism, and ambivalence should be taken seriously as a resource of political struggle, potential reform, or even out-right alternatives. While the internal discourse of disaster

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<sup>44</sup> Rozario focuses his theoretical analysis on the more optimistic Americans who insist that catastrophes are opportunities, if not necessities, for progress. My account builds upon his by giving these ambivalent and skeptical ideas more theoretical attention in how they compete to shape the cultural politics of natural disasters. See Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).



management might regard itself as being merely technical and apolitical, it is quite different in public debates that are constituted by notions of national emergency and new visions of citizenship. Tropical cyclones occurring in these contexts show a tendency to force disaster managers and other officials to justify to the public how they use their power. Moreover, these attempts to justify their power are forced to contend with discourses outside of scientific knowledge, addressing politically contested terrain of modern citizenship.

While there are historically rooted patterns in the discursive repertoires that shape these framing contests, there is no political teleology to emergencies. Global warming is partisan to neither authoritarian nor democratic formations. In responding to such disasters, there are opportunities for mobilizing new values and institutions, and to re-authorize old ones. These opportunities exist because the sense of emergency that some cyclones help create makes a narrative of the common good easy for the public audience to apprehend. The perception of overwhelmed officials and the need for spontaneous volunteerism draws people into public-spirited activity—popular discussion and debate over the common good, and extraordinary popular organizing on behalf of the nation.

I share the hopes of scholars and activists who see the manifestations of climate change, like tropical cyclones, as opportunities to mobilize popular debate that calls into question managerial orthodoxy. I also agree that such disasters are opportunities for mobilizing new, cosmopolitan identities in the face of our shared destiny in a warming globe.<sup>45</sup> But in order to understand the feasibility and challenges of such mobilizations,

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<sup>45</sup> Ulrich Beck, “Cosmopolitanism as Imagined Communities of Global Risk,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55, no. 10, (2011): 1346-1361.

and the multiple directions in which this politicization is likely to occur, it is first necessary to examine how power is shaping public responses to climate-related natural disasters, how it shapes the conditions of what a more democratic version of climate politics could look like.

By looking and listening closely to the messiness of public discourse after climate-related natural disasters, we can see patterns. There are multiple, competing ways to understand these events as public problems that implicate our social, economic, and political institutions. These are the pre-existing venues for public thinking and organizing around the politics of climate-related natural disasters. As such, they hold untapped political potential.

In times of national emergency, when everyone is paying attention, in the moment when activists could use the symbolic power of the disaster to pose alternatives, it is not inevitable that public debates around disasters is lured into a political cul-de-sac of the politics of managerial success and failure. The public debate need not focus on blame or praise for state officials in whether they address short-term problems, tethering “the common good” to the status-quo, or limiting it to those within our national borders. It is a failure of environmentalists, or any radical movement for that matter, to surrender the field of politically salient anxieties and hopes that these debates articulate, and allow such managerialism to determine the public agenda. By showing how more than just a technocratic imagination is being applied to emergency thinking, I hope to spotlight other visions of political authority and collective action that are in play as we respond to global warming. It is not just as a threat to our survival or a reassertion of the status-quo. It is also a political opening.

The rest of the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter Two examines how new frameworks of national emergency and citizenship came to constitute public discussion and mobilization after calamity in the United States. Chapter Three shows how this discursive repertoire also emerged in Oman, similarly changing how disasters were given meaning in public. Chapters Four and Five document the processes of public meaning-making and political contestation in the US and Oman after recent, extremely destructive tropical cyclones. The concluding chapter mobilizes the empirical material documented and analyzed in the preceding chapters to reflect upon the political possibilities and pitfalls that lie within global warming.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**HOW NATURAL DISASTERS BECAME UNPLANNED POLITICAL**  
**SPECTACLES IN THE US**

The storm that would be called the “Great Galveston Hurricane” or “the Great Storm of 1900,” hit the island city of Galveston, Texas on September 8<sup>th</sup>. At the time, the island was only nine feet above sea level, with a population of approximately 38,000. The fifteen-foot storm surge meant that there was not a single building on the island that went undamaged. The total inundation allowed waves to lift the houses right off of their foundation, leaving over ten thousand homeless. The number of dead are estimated at between six and twelve thousand, and the property damage has been estimated as high as \$30 million; adjusting for inflation, this figure comes to approximately \$932.9 million.<sup>1</sup>

Occurring just before a presidential election, the Galveston Hurricane is remarkable in retrospect. Killing over six thousand people, the storm remains the most deadly hurricane to have hit the United States. With five-times the casualty-rate as Hurricane Katrina, a contemporary observer or scholars of the Maslowian school of thought might expect to see a robust attempt by the Federal government to provide aid after such an incredible calamity, and a great deal of public scrutiny over its efforts. But neither occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> The figure of 30 million is from Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000). The calculation uses a 3007.14% inflation rate between 1900 and 2020.

Together, this and the subsequent chapter provide a longitudinal explanation for how disasters have *become* occasions for political spectacles in the US and Oman. I do so by arguing that two discursive formations converged in each country to help make large-scale natural disasters into political spectacles. The first discourse is one through which people interpreted threats, what I call here a “national emergency.” The second is the growing prominence in political discourse of a new vision of citizenship. These discourses have never become hegemonic. There remain other ways to interpret both large-scale disasters and the extent to which governments are responsible for protecting people from them. Yet these frameworks have become such salient features of the discursive repertoire in the twenty-first century that governments now have to justify their rule in reference to them. I argue that in order to understand the kinds of political struggles that disasters make possible today, one must attend to how these frameworks emerged to give meaning to agency and responsibility in the face of natural disasters in the twentieth century.

In this chapter, I show that the emergence of new discursive frameworks of national emergency and citizenship explains why now, and not before, American Presidents seek to justify their rule in the aftermath of natural disasters, and why other competing political actors are using disasters as occasions to challenge the status-quo—a contemporary dynamic I examine in more detail in later chapters.<sup>2</sup> A skeptical reader might mistake this chapter as merely another account of the perennial debate within

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<sup>2</sup> My argument compliments that of Davies in that we both see changes in news media and national culture as essential to explaining this politicization of natural disasters in American history. See Gareth Davies, “The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster, 1865-1900,” *Journal of Political History*, 26, no. 3, (2014): 305-326.

American politics regarding how much the federal government should intervene in local problems. Certainly that debate is part of the story I tell below. But paying attention to how the new discourses of national emergency and citizenship constitute disaster contention also helps us recognize these changes as part of a broader phenomenon that is not unique to America's peculiar federated system, contrary to how the changing political history of disasters in America is so often told by scholars.<sup>3</sup> The federal-versus-state-power debate does not capture how the very idea of being a member of a political community, a citizen, has shifted from being members of shared system of law enforcement and tax collection, to being cared for as part of a larger population that occasionally suffers from calamity. Such a shift means a change in how both state and federal power is exercised and advertised, how civil society actors mobilizes to shape the lives of disaster victims in the name of national solidarity, and how people attempt to hold their government accountable in "emergencies."

I begin this chapter by examining the emergence of national emergencies as a framework, which was made possible in the nineteenth century by new communications technology utilized by philanthropists and journalists to frame disasters as national events that demand urgent, nation-wide mobilization. This advocacy brought them into conflict with a class of local boosters who sought to hide such problems from public attention. Using the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 as a case study, the third section argues that some large-scale natural disasters in the early twentieth century evaded the censorship and spin

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<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*; Patrick S. Roberts, *Disasters and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Platt, *Disasters and Democracy: the Politics of Extreme Natural Events*.

of boosters, and were commonly understood as national emergencies, leading to nationwide mobilization in the name of charity. What is striking about Galveston in retrospect is that despite it being the most deadly hurricane in American history, it had no corresponding *national* political contestation. The post-disaster framing contests that we see today in the national public were absent. All the political mobilization following the Galveston Hurricane remained local. Disasters, understood as national emergencies, were not yet political spectacles in which the standing of government representatives was put on trial or in which the values of national membership were debated. As the subsequent two sections demonstrate, this would change as very successful political movements appealed to new visions of citizenship to define the goals of government. In this way, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the Progressive and New Deal movements that they represented, were pivotal in making national emergencies about national political authority. This idea was expanded upon by Senators and civil rights activists in the 1960s, who helped to fully centralize disaster response in the hands of the federal government, setting the stage for the kinds of disaster politics we see today.

### **Disasters as Local and National Events**

Calamities are often occasions for public discourse that gives broader, conflicting meanings to the event. The themes of these discourses often address issues of political membership, or what we today call “citizenship.” The sudden and terrible destruction would often prompt people to ask, who are we, what do we owe each other in the face of catastrophe, and what kinds of moral, economic, or political actions are necessary in light of this event? But prior to the twentieth century, there were no clear expectations for the

American government's response to disasters. Thus, unlike today, there were no political scandals in the name of government negligence for disaster-caused suffering and destruction. It is only recently that government representatives have had to justify their authority after disaster. That is not to say that Americans were apathetic towards the suffering of disaster victims. Indeed, before there were any scandals, there were mass mobilizations around the country to respond to the urgency that large-scale disasters presented to Americans. But such nation-wide activity and discussion did not have any corresponding national political goals. Prior to the early twentieth century, political mobilization after calamity remained isolated within the communities directly affected. In that sense, the US had "national emergencies" before it had a clear repertoire of who was responsible for responding to them, and how they should conduct their intervention.

### **Calamity, Community, and the Early American State**

In colonial America, disasters were variously interpreted as the natural outcome of the environment, or as the result of some supernatural forces. Especially common was the notion that disasters were divine punishments for collective sins, or divine blessings—opportunities for salvation because they prompted communities to correct themselves to a Godly path. For these reasons, the authority to interpret calamities for the community had great import, as such stories could prompt religious revival, moral reform, and acts of charity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> When it came to providing relief to disaster victims, it was often charity that provided the most help, though some funds came from the local parish and in the form of tax reduction. Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity*, 31-65.



After the creation of the American federal government, major disasters remained wholly local events. Instead of a formal, national response that would emerge later, disasters in early America instigated *ad hoc* relief efforts by business leaders, local politicians, charities, churches, and those same actors in neighboring cities. In a dramatic example of the lack of federal responsibility for such events, picture the scene in the then-Federal capital of Philadelphia in 1796, when a plague of Yellow Fever hit. President George Washington, along with the rest of the governing officials, fled from the city abandoning the problem entirely to the remaining residents. While residents used newspaper editorials to castigate doctors and clergymen who fled the capital, they made no mention of the flight of the federal government.<sup>5</sup> At the time, little was understood as to the causes and proper treatments of the disease, and so the response was often fatalism and flight, not management. The epidemic wiped out approximately 10% of the city's population. The people and dead bodies of the new nation's abandoned capital were tended to by a spontaneously formed group led by a local banker and philanthropist.<sup>6</sup> Other cases of disaster response in this period are not so starkly anarchic, as local politicians often did stick around to govern the aftermath and protect their business interests. But the federal government rarely played a role in these projects.<sup>7</sup>

The federal government involved itself in disaster response intermittently, with little effort at showing off its beneficence. Instances of federal assistance to disaster

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<sup>5</sup> David Paul Nord, "Readership as Citizenship in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Philadelphia, PA: Science History Publications, 1997), 19-44.

<sup>6</sup> Davies, "Dealing with Disaster," 56.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, *Disasters and the American State*, 16-40.

victims occurred on a case-by-case basis in the first decades after American independence. There was no official policy on the books specifically addressing natural disasters, but rather a more general mandate in the constitution for Congress to look after the “general welfare” of the nation. If someone lost their home to flood or fire, for example, then they could appeal to this notion of welfare and ask the government for assistance.

But to be successful in getting such aid, individuals would have to do more than report their suffering to Congressmen.<sup>8</sup> They would have to make their innocence legible to the state, wherein their hardship appeared to be occurring through no fault of their own.<sup>9</sup> When someone would ask for assistance, Congressmen would debate whether they were simply unfortunate, and therefore deserving official aid, or if they had taken some undue risk which brought the doom upon themselves. For example, fire victims in Alexandria received help without much debate. However, a merchant who lost his ships at sea was denied assistance because Congressmen perceived this loss as an inherent risk of the import business, something the government could not be expected to help with. In Dauber’s study of these debates, she finds that for Congress to provide aid, the affliction had to appear sudden and through no fault of the victim. It was not need, “welfare,” but *undue* suffering that Congress sought to redress for its citizens.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This gendered wording is appropriate to the context, as the first woman would not be elected to Congress until 1917.

<sup>9</sup> Michele Landis Dauber, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Dauber, *The Sympathetic State*, p. 87.

An audience was ready to listen and help because many did see those suffering from calamities as innocent. While some religious leaders were still giving sermons describing such events as instances of divine judgement in the manner of Sodom and Gomorrah, as some still do today, others, including those in Congress, do not appear to have seen God's hand in such events. Instead of embracing the suffering as some form of sanctified affliction, wherein earthly pain is to be endured for cosmic reasons beyond our comprehension, Congressmen had what Susan Sontag called a modern understanding of human suffering: it is out of place, an accident that must be fixed.<sup>11</sup> Christian theologians and laymen, along with secular, scientific peddlers of the Enlightenment, had long-since created concepts, theories, and everyday conveniences that distanced the relevance of God's agency from nature. From their perspective, the meaning of events, including cataclysms, was ambiguous enough such that people could put the best face on them. They often described disasters as misfortunes in a world where justice is dealt in the afterlife and not necessarily in this world. Hence, nature was commonly viewed as an uncaring force that afflicted harm or prosperity without regard to whether people deserved it. In what is on the face of it a strange use of religious rhetoric, Congressmen used theological language, "act of God" or "the visitation of providence," to render disasters as random misfortunes, containing no moral significance from on high. Such randomness underscored the innocence of victims of a disaster, as opposed to their guilt

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<sup>11</sup> On the notion of sanctified affliction, see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 78-112. On the modern understanding of suffering, see Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 98-99.

as would be evidenced by an event of divine justice like Gomorrah.<sup>12</sup> This disenchanted view of the world made it possible to speak of innocence and victimhood in the context of earthquakes, fires, floods, and storms, and the need to help them.

While these debates in Congress show the early existence of a discourse of citizenship that made government responsible for some forms of disaster response, two qualifications are necessary for the sake of understanding what would come later. First, this account of an early discourse of government responsibility to its citizens after disasters is complicated by notions of giving that go beyond the boundaries of national membership and the contractual logic of the state's duty. Christian charity, or its secularized off-spring, "humanitarianism," also shaped congressional actions after disaster. The figure of the innocent victim occasionally appeared as a foreigner, beckoning aid beyond the boundaries of citizenship, even if such aid violated the law. These notions of charity were used in Congress to legitimize international aid to victims of disaster as early as the 1812 earthquake in Caracas, and later for famines in Ireland and Russia. When congressional opponents of aid for disaster victims cited constitutional limits on Congress's role in governance, other Congressmen invoked extra-constitutional sources of authority to legitimize providing the aid. They invoked the duties of a "Christian nation," and cited the demands of "humanity." The figure of the innocent disaster victim monopolized political rhetoric so affectively that when congressmen argued against providing aid to people in other countries, they did not invoke some

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<sup>12</sup> Parallel to this secularizing of the meaning of "act of God" was that of the word "disaster" itself. "Disaster" originally referring to an "ill-started" event on account of a star or planet, from a time when astrological or supernatural forces, were thought to create misfortune on earth. Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity*, 11.

argument for austerity in the name of isolationism or “America-first.” Instead, they questioned the innocence of the victims. For example, one congressmen argued, “if Russia is in trouble... it grows out of the people’s own fault, and out of their own idleness.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than simply pointing out that Congress was under no contractual obligation to help Russians, these statesmen insisted that a lazy Russian is not an innocent victim deserving of aid.

The second qualification to this account of Federal aid in early America is that there were no consequential rules or norms in place that made it so every American citizen could expect aid in their times of need. Just as the protection of liberty was enshrined in the constitution, and yet women, African Americans, and others could not expect to enjoy it, disaster victims of the nineteenth century could not expect to have their own welfare protected as some guarantee of the American social contract. Rarely in session in the nineteenth century, Congress was often not on hand to receive pleas for disaster aid.<sup>14</sup> When they were in session, they did indeed reject pleas for aid on the grounds that those requesting it were not innocent victims, or simply on the grounds that it would establish costly precedents for future pleas.<sup>15</sup> As will be described in more detail later in this chapter, federal responses to disaster were not subject to public scrutiny or political scandal during this time. What I hope to have established here are some of the cultural and institutional predecessors of what would become the new framework of citizenship in the US.

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<sup>13</sup> Dauber, *The Sympathetic State*, 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Gareth Davies, “The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster,” 315-316.

<sup>15</sup> Dauber, *The Sympathetic State*.

## **Localized Disasters and the Framing Wars of Nineteenth-Century Calamities**

The use of telegraph, and later radio, in the nineteenth century made it possible to see calamities as national emergencies. These technologies transmitted information, and later images and sounds, from local events to a national public dispersed throughout the country. For the first time, a national audience was capable of witnessing, albeit vicariously, the drama of disasters as they unfolded in real-time. Harkening the audience as not just voyeurs, but as potential participants in the drama through the giving of aid, national emergencies became events of mass mobilization. I address that phenomena in the subsequent section.

Here, I show that bringing the national spotlight to these disasters, and making them into urgent problems demanding intervention of “the nation,” was not something that happened automatically once the media technology was available. This new medium instigated competing advocacy over how much publicity these events received, and how they were framed. Making disasters into national emergencies was therefore an *accomplishment* of philanthropic organizations and for-profit media outlets who sought to capture the attention of a national public and direct it toward local suffering. To do so, they had to fight local elites who sought to hide the drama from the national public in order to protect their financial interests.

The historical scholarship on disasters in nineteenth century America shows multiple types of actors competing in the disaster-framing contests within the local and national media. One of the most significant actors was a new economic class of urban developers, or “boosters,” who maintained a special interest in how local disasters were

communicated to a larger national audience. These local elites sought to defend their financial interests in portraying their newly urbanizing and industrializing territory as being safe for human settlement and financial investment.<sup>16</sup> In these cases, elite landowners and capitalists tended to minimize the extent to which this territory was deemed too dangerous for their workforce to inhabit, and for outside prospectors to invest in. For example, Florida boosters complained about the national press referring to all cyclones as “Florida Hurricanes.”<sup>17</sup>

There were two target audiences for the boosters’ “nothing-to-see-here” spin. Locally, elites tried to minimize religious interpretations of the storm among workers, who tended to view disasters as having theological, instead of natural origins. Accordingly, a hurricane or earthquake can be a divine sign of the sinfulness of the city and reason to migrate.<sup>18</sup> Another popular response to disaster which disrupted the status-quo of industrializing areas was the holding of religious revivals. Just as people are less likely to stay put and show up to work if they saw their home as fundamentally unsafe, the same can be said if they saw their city as a modern-day Gomorrah. Moreover, local

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the real-estate boom in Miami after World War I and its relationship to cyclones, see Marian Moser Jones, “Tempest in the Forbidden City: Racism, Violence, and Vulnerability in the 1926 Miami Hurricane,” *Journal of Policy History*, 26, no. 3 (2014): 384-405.

<sup>17</sup> This practice was eventually replaced when Hurricanes were given female names by the Weather Bureau in 1949. Steinburg, *Acts of God*, 47-68.

<sup>18</sup> Historically, perhaps the most common response to ecological calamity has been migration to safer areas. For this reason, many states have seen disasters as problems for maintaining public order and taxation. Thus Ottoman Sultans, notoriously averse to being involved in matters of local governance throughout their empire, would respond to local famine, fires, and plague only when they resulted in mass migration that threatened the peace and disrupted tax collection. Sometimes they would do so by providing aid to local governors, often tax relief, while also sending military forces to prevent people from fleeing. On Ottoman responses to disaster, see Yaron Ayalon, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortune*, (New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

elites had an interest in how prospective investors in other parts of the country perceived the future of these developing territories. Like fleeing workers, potential investors were unlikely to gamble on a real-estate boom in a place that is proven to be systematically unsafe.<sup>19</sup>

For these reasons, local politicians, factory owners, real-estate entrepreneurs, and the owners of local papers had it in their financial interest to frame disasters as manageable, material problems, not spiritual ones. This group of local elites also had it in their interests to minimize the material threat posed by disasters. They did so by deflating reports of their damage, and denying their systemic nature, rendering them as fluke accidents, rather than recurring features of the location. Steinburg's *Acts of God* documents this propaganda in urbanizing areas on the east coast of the United States, like Charleston and Miami, and those on the west coast, like San Francisco. His accounts show many examples in the late nineteenth, early-twentieth century of local elites trying to control the public narrative around disasters for both local and national audiences. Sermons at elite churches would deny God's role in the event, and emphasize the Christian duty of getting back to work. Op-eds in the local press would circulate a similar message, emphasizing the need for calm and returning to "normal."

For these reasons, boosters came into conflict with the scientific community. Scientists agreed with the boosters that disasters were material, not spiritual problems, but emphasized that they were systemic dangers. Scientists insisted that the land was

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<sup>19</sup> Hence, the real-estate boom in 1920s Miami came to a halt after a devastating 1927 hurricane. Marian Moser Jones, "Tempest in the Forbidden City," 395.



simply not safe due to the climatic forces that generated disasters, as these systems were beyond the power of human management.<sup>20</sup> The California politicians and business owners would blame fire, not earthquakes, for destroying their cities. Unlike earthquakes, fire was seen as a hazard that could be managed. Hence, there was a concerted effort to spread the idea that the incredible devastation of San Francisco by the 1906 earthquake was merely due to the fire started by the tremors: the seismic, and therefore persistent occurrence of earthquakes was not the problem. They sought to promote the idea that their city could be made safer through better organization. By this logic, a new water system was needed, but not government regulation of urban development above the fault lines.<sup>21</sup>

As boosters commodified disaster-prone territory and sought to defend its reputation in the eyes of potential investors, this additionally pitted them against two other types of actors who sought to use the media to tell a more sensational story to a national audience. The profit-driven national press would often focus on natural disasters, reporting on lurid details of suffering in order to sell newspapers.<sup>22</sup> Local elites

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<sup>20</sup> However, there were utopians among the scientific community that hoped to control the climate through cloud seeding and even nuclear explosions. This culminated in weather modification research by General Electric and the United States military after WWII, in which they examined how they might seed clouds to cause rain, and bomb hurricanes out of existence. But the promise of this effort was scientifically suspect with mixed results. Moreover, it created legal problems for the project's leaders as they were sued by citizens of Savannah, Georgia for allegedly causing a hurricane to change course and destroy their parts of their city. Although the courts found in favor of the hurricane-bombers, the project was eventually abandoned due to these pressures. See Raymond Arsenault, "The public storm: Hurricanes and the State in twentieth-century America," in *Paradise lost? The Environmental History of Florida*, ed. J.E. Davis, & Raymond Arsenault, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005) 276-277.

<sup>21</sup> Members of the scientific community fought back, and their campaign was served well in the 1930s when earthquakes killed many people and without starting fires. See Steinburg, *Acts of God*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Gareth Davies, "The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster," 316.

also fought against the American Red Cross, who publicized the destruction of disasters in newspapers and radio in order to raise money around the country for their relief efforts.<sup>23</sup> For example, Clara Barton, the organization's founder, was chased out of Texas by local boosters after trying to focus national attention on a drought.

On other occasions the American Red Cross fought back, as was the case after a hurricane in Florida in 1926. One representative of the organization denounced the boosters: "the officials of Florida from the Governor down, and the real-estate operators have seriously handicapped [our] efforts to provide relief for those who suffered."<sup>24</sup> And in what might rightly be understood as a heretofore unrecognized predecessor of the contemporary environmental justice movement, African American disaster victims also used the national media, the Red Cross, and the NAACP to generate support against the racial discrimination they faced at the hands of local relief organizations.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, by the early decades of the twentieth century, the boosters were fighting a losing battle. They could no longer deflect national attention away from the calamities that hit their territory. As the next section demonstrates, large-scale natural disasters became "national emergencies" in extreme cases in the late nineteenth century. And by the early decades of the twentieth-century, more and more disasters would become

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<sup>23</sup> See Jones for an account of this after the Miami hurricane of 1926. "Tempest in the Forbidden City;" Jones also documents this as occurring when Clara Barton, in the early years of the American Red Cross, was chased out of Texas by local boosters who did not want her publicizing the effects of the drought. See Mariana Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Steinburg, *Acts of God*, 57-63.

<sup>25</sup> Examples of the NAACP's work after hurricanes are documented in Jones, "Tempest in the Forbidden City," and Andrew Morris, "Hurricane Camille and the New Politics of Federal Disaster, 1965-1970," *Journal of Policy History*, 26 no. 3 (2014): 406-426.

objects of national attention an emergency mobilization. This shift in public understandings of disaster is clearest in how philanthropists and media outlets were becoming more successful in bringing in donations from, and selling newspapers to, Americans far away from the calamity.

### **National Emergencies with No National Scandals**

Once the interests of boosters shifted away from hiding, minimizing, or re-framing the disaster in the new medium of national media, we see large-scale disasters mobilizing a national public to address the suffering as a national emergency. The Galveston Hurricane of 1900 illustrates this shift.<sup>26</sup> With a national media in place and the boosters overwhelmed by the destruction, major disasters were treated by a broad coalition of responders as “national emergencies.” They organized as an *ad hoc* collection of actors, including civilians, businesses, local and neighboring state governments, civil society organizations, as well as federal agencies. But unlike later responses to national emergencies, this national response was not politicized. The focus of these actors was on alleviating suffering, not on whether the government was doing its job or whether the disaster pointed to broader problems with the status-quo.

In the aftermath of the Hurricane, the Mayor of Galveston created a Central Relief Committee, composed of several local civic leaders to work with him to coordinate the relief effort. As the hurricane cut the city off from communication to the outside world

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<sup>26</sup> Unless otherwise specified, for the following account of the Galveston Hurricane, I draw from Patricia Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*.

and washed away the connecting bridges, they had to take a boat to the mainland to cable anyone who could offer aid. They called local governments in surrounding cities, as well as President McKinley. In contrast to the aforementioned efforts of elite boosters who sought to down-play the damage of local disasters, it appears that the complete destruction of Galveston convinced the city's elite to take a different approach and publicize their destitution to a national audience, at first pleading for aid, and later, advertising the recovery effort. As one historian put it, "The city needed to demonstrate [to the national audience] its determination to rebuild on a grander scale, with projects that would convince old and new investors that Galveston's spirit had not been broken." For this effort, they would not only re-build, but transform the island. They raised a giant sea-wall and increased the elevation of the island by eight feet. Tourist pamphlets would later brag of the city's major banks, transportation infrastructure, and invite people to visit, "the Seawall City."<sup>27</sup>

Demonstrating the minimal role of the federal government in disaster response during this period, federal aid was limited to providing left-over tents from the Spanish-American war to house the ten-thousand individuals who were left homeless by the storm. Foreshadowing the racialized reaction to Katrina, the Texas National Guard would later arrive to enforce martial law among the debris, especially targeting African Americans. Indeed, the only object of national scandal that appears in newspapers of this

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<sup>27</sup> This may be the exception to prove the rule, regarding the pattern of damage-denial on behalf of boosters in Steinburg's scholarship. See Stephen P. Kretzman, "A House Built Upon the Sand: Race, Class, Gender, and the Galveston Hurricane of 1900," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1995), 340-345.

time are rumors of African American men chopping off the swollen fingers of corpses to remove their rings.

More substantial than the federal response was the extra-institutional action taken around the country by private and public actors to serve the victims in Galveston. Newspapers circulated accounts of the destruction, and Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, rushed to the site to organize the distribution of food, clothing, and other supplies. Barton's efforts to publicize the plight and the means to help would channel participation from individuals and large companies around the country. Barton made use of editorials in national newspapers and telegraphs to influential figures in order to communicate the scale of human suffering and the urgency of need. She hailed a national public as being capable agents of relief in times of emergency. In one appeal, she implored the public to see their suffering in the same light as Americans who suffered other natural disasters—citing “the floods of the Ohio and Mississippi, of Johnston, and of Port Royal.” Underlying the national emergency framing of Barton's appeals, she emphasized the urgency of the matter, writing, “He gives twice who gives quickly.”<sup>28</sup>

Donations began pouring in with the help of private businesses, shipped without cost by the railroad companies. The telegraph company created an emergency communications network among the debris at no cost. Meanwhile, fundraisers were held throughout the nation. For example, William Randolph Hearst organized a “bazaar” and gala, in which he had local stores donate jewels, furs, and other luxury items to be sold to

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster, Containing a Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamity of Modern Times*, (University of North Texas Libraries, 1900), <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph26719/m1/5/>, 40.

the elites of New York City, who were then entertained at a fancy hotel by Mark Twain. The National Afro-American Press Association organized and sent donations to Galveston, with a political message of trans-racial solidarity attached: “the colored people of this country can do much to assist in helping the suffering here... [They] are willing to do their part in every particular to show the people of the world that they are with Galveston in her hour of distress.”<sup>29</sup> Note how the message frames disaster response as a marker of civic duty, “doing their part,” in a special time of emergency, “her hour of distress.”

Like the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1796, what might appear today as the scant participation of federal authorities in the provision of aid did not in fact merit concern by the victims in Galveston, nor of the national public. Citizens and institutions around the country *did* respond to the “emergency” of Galveston by watching the news of the event in real-time and doing what they could to provide aid from afar. But there was no corresponding political spectacle at the national level. From a Maslowian perspective, it would be remarkable given the scale of destruction and national attention that no one thought it relevant to question, for example, whether President William McKinley was doing enough—not even his political enemies. As the hurricane hit Galveston just two months before the 1900 presidential election, William Jennings Bryan, President McKinley’s opponent, made no mention of the disaster in his national campaign.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*.

<sup>30</sup> I base this statement on the fact that there is no record of Bryan commenting on the Galveston Hurricane in the Library of Congress’s archive “Chronicling America,” which digitized hundreds of thousands of newspaper entries between 1690 and present. The archive provides ample contemporary documentation of both Bryan’s and McKinley’s campaigns. But Galveston does not feature in any of this coverage.

Months after defeating Bryan, McKinley gave his State of the Union Address. Speaking just three months after landfall and while the city was still rebuilding, he made no mention of the most deadly storm in the nation's history.<sup>31</sup> This political silence on disasters was not unique to McKinley's reign. Just seven years earlier, President Grover Cleveland denied several requests for federal aid to disaster victims in 1893, and faced no political consequences for doing so.<sup>32</sup>

The political contestation that did emerge after the Galveston Hurricane was entirely local. Contention and mobilization after the disaster focused on the shortcomings of local social and political institutions, not those of Texas, let alone the federal government. One of these arenas of contention was over what kinds of authority were needed to protect the welfare of Galveston. Like other parts of the country during the "Progressive Era," there had already been rumblings to run the town more like a business prior to the storm. The disaster provided an opportunity for local progressives to mobilize for such a change. A group of bank and corporate leaders that had originally

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<sup>31</sup> On this point, I can anticipate a potential objection from scholars of the changing role of the American Presidency. The objection would sound like this: McKinley's silence on this issue is unremarkable, given the conventions of Presidential speech at the time. According to scholars of the so-called "Rhetorical Presidency," Presidents prior to the Progressive Era rarely, if ever, addressed the public to campaign for themselves or for a particular policy. It was this convention, and not the absence of a new discourse of citizenship, that explains why McKinley made no attempt to use the Galveston disaster as a campaign opportunity. However, recent scholarship on McKinley shows that on several occasions he did in fact engage in such campaigning in two speaking tours—one after the Spanish American War, the other for the 1898 midterms. Thus, McKinley was a public-facing politician, and it remains remarkable that he did not seize upon the Galveston spectacle to campaign for himself. On McKinley's campaigning, see Robert Saldin, "William McKinley and the Rhetorical Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 41, no. 1 (2011): 119-134.

<sup>32</sup> The first denial was for drought assistance in Texas. The second was for hurricane victims in the Sea Islands and New Orleans. The Senate also refused to make appropriations. On the two hurricanes, see Eleonora Rohland, *Changes in the Air: Hurricanes in New Orleans from 1718 to the Present*, (New York City, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019) 157-161. On the Earthquake, see John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*, (New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), chap. 31.

mobilized to ensure the re-dredging of the shipping port subsequently drew-up plans for an entirely different structure of local government. Their plan would put Galveston in the hands of five experts, “commissioners,” each appointed by the governor to focus on a specific issue of public concern. That body would be in charge of all policy decisions, blending legislative and executive authority, and eliminating the ability of citizens to elect their local leaders.

Opponents of the plan decried its lack of democratic representation, while proponents claimed it would be more “efficient, [with] businesslike management” than the corrupt political machines that had ruled Galveston. The reformers also had the advantage of controlling most of the newspapers, allowing them to publicized stories of corruption of those they wished to replace in city hall, charging that they were “indifferent to the welfare, safety, and health” of Galveston, and that, “businessmen and methods are what we need now.” The labor unions supported these reforms, motivated by their mutual interest with the business elite in re-opening the shipping ports as quickly as possible.<sup>33</sup> This new form of local government was approved after it was agreed that some of the commissioners would be subject to democratic election, and after a challenge by the courts, all commissioners were be made subject to elections. This “expert”-driven model of local governance was then credited for the rapid recovery of the city.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, no page numbers.

<sup>34</sup> The “Galveston Plan” then spread throughout the nation as part of the Progressive era reforms that sought to make government more efficient by putting it in the hands of experts. Bradley R. Rice. “Commission Form of City Government,” *Handbook of Texas Online: Texas State Historical Association*, June 2010, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/moc01>.



The other arena for contention and mobilization was in regards to women's participation and issues of public health that had been previously relegated to "private" concerns of charity and households. Prior to the hurricane, white women's participation in promoting the common good was restricted to caring for the city's most vulnerable—orphans, children, and the elderly. But Clara Barton's arrival, and her appointing of other white women to coordinate relief hubs, provided a model for local women to take on leadership roles outside of "private" spaces, and to assert power over the local government.

Lacking the right to vote, white women in Galveston organized extra-institutional means of asserting power to influence local politicians during and after the recovery. In doing so, they expanded what were considered public matters for government intervention in the aftermath of the storm. For example, elite women founded the Women's Health Protective Association in 1901 to formalize the welfare distribution in the aftermath of the storm. This group was novel in that it was open to white women of any social class. First tending to the relief and recovery effort, it began to lobby the city government to conform to nation-wide trends in the Progressive era. Calling it "municipal housekeeping," they advocated for the stricter enforcement of government regulations around public health and sanitation, even taking direct action by creating their own, unofficial inspection committees. They also pressed for new regulations over public spaces. Citing the authority of doctors, they publicized the squalid conditions in schools, jails, stables, and the like, as threats to the public good in need of the local government regulation. Signaling the power of this new appeal of expert rule for public health goals, Clara Barton herself would be removed from her position as head of the

American Red Cross years later. Her ousters would cite her lack of formal training and tendency to not share decision-making power with other “health and charity professional or social elites.”<sup>35</sup>

These various mobilizations after the Galveston Hurricane demonstrate that at the turn of the twentieth century, a new way of communication made it possible for a national public to share concern over an event, understanding it as a national emergency. With the boosters’ denialism absent, extemporaneous organization among citizens, businesses, charities, and local and the national government emerged to provide aid as fast as possible. This recovery effort included political mobilization, but only at the local level. The nascent Progressive movement and women’s organizations found footholds in Galveston within the groups that organized to respond to the immediate problems of the storm. Their efforts included expanding the role of political institutions into promoting the health and welfare of local citizens, and insisting that those institutions be in the hands of a managerial elite. In short, the response to the Galveston Hurricane is an instance of national emergency without a corresponding national debate over its broader political significance. What is conspicuously absent from these emergency responses is any concern for the performance of the federal government.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Julia F. Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29.

<sup>36</sup> Historical scholarship of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire similarly documents a national mobilization for relief, and with political contestation remaining at the local level. See Andrea Rees Davies, *Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

What explains the lack of public scandal during these early national emergencies is the absence of a popular conception that the Federal government ought to make such broad-scale interventions into such urgent problems. Galveston shows how national emergencies were initially a national problem with no national problem-solver, and certainly no sense of who or what was responsible for serving the victims. The American public stepped in as a form of national solidarity or philanthropy, what was often called “charity.”<sup>37</sup> But these far-away actors attached no broader political meaning to Galveston. They did not raise questions as whether government agencies or federal leadership were fulfilling their roles. Nor did they circulate broader critiques of what the disaster “reveals” about the status-quo. Such political framings remained at the local level, between residents and authorities that were directly affected by the calamity. Though these local activists mobilized behind values like public health and hygiene, they understood these goals as local concerns, without regard for national institutions and values. They successfully pushed the notion that public institutions should be run by “experts,” and have the duty to ensure the well-being of the population by regulating the economy and public health. Previously “private” issues were made public, the responsibility of the newly created local government that would oversee the recovery of Galveston. But their vision for political change stopped at shores of Galveston, showing us that even as natural disasters came to be seen as national emergencies, it did not automatically follow that these emergencies would implicate the standing of national authorities.

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<sup>37</sup> On the distinction between “contract” and “charity” in notions of American citizenship, see Fraser and Gordon, “Civil Citizenship against Social Citizenship?” 90-107.

### **The Mississippi Flood of 1927: the Political Capital of National Emergencies**

Both the localism and progressivism of disaster politics in the early twentieth century would expand to the national level as such approaches to disaster, sometimes referred to as “scientific philanthropy” or “human engineering,” became symbols of national citizenship and political legitimacy in the early twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> While other scholars have argued that Herbert Hoover’s response to the 1927 Mississippi Flood was instrumental to transferring disaster response into the hands of the federal government,<sup>39</sup> here I make the case that it also significantly contributed to popularizing a new vision for government power and responsibility vis-à-vis disasters. This consequence certainly was not Hoover’s intention, and it resulted largely due to the ambiguity in his public performance. He acted as the nation’s first “disaster czar,” leading the federal charge for disaster relief and reconstruction. Yet, Hoover disavowed the notion that the federal government should expand its role in protecting civilians from natural disasters, attempting to get the Red Cross and private businesses to provide the bulk of the funding

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<sup>38</sup> On the face of it, this claim is in tension with Dauber’s scholarship, in which she argues that federal responsibility for responding to natural disasters had *always* been a feature of the social contract of America. According to her, this is why Congress would make special funding available to disaster victims since independence, citing its responsibility to oversee the “general welfare” of the nation. My claim is that while providing financial aid to disaster victims or funding the repair of public infrastructure damaged by natural hazards had been within the purview of Congress, this aid did not register as a demonstration of state legitimacy. Indeed, Davies’ own work shows that Congressional support for disaster provisions was circumstantial, not a guarantee of citizenship. And my analysis of Galveston above shows that the absence of a federal response to disaster victims tended to not trigger a public scandal over such “neglect,” precisely because the public face of the national government had not yet been become associated with this progressive vision of citizenship. Gareth Davies, “Review of *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*,” *The Historian*, 77, no. 1, (2015): 116-118.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, *Disaster and the American State*.

and “boots on the ground.”<sup>40</sup> But his actions nevertheless demonstrated to an attentive public the value of this expansion of federal power during emergencies. In trying to aggrandize his public reputation and secure his future candidacy for the President, Hoover’s attempt to show off his own leadership had the unintended consequence of advertising the value of state power in times of emergency. It would be the New Dealers who came after him that would insist that every American ought to be able to depend on such power, making it a feature of citizenship, rather than just a feature of Hoover’s greatness.

Before addressing the 1927 flood, it might help to stress that Hoover’s role in implicating state power in disasters was only possible because of much larger trends within American politics. In the preceding decades, a collection of bottom-up and top-down initiatives succeeded in expanding the reach of Washington and turning its efforts toward new goals, like the promotion of public health.<sup>41</sup> There had been a large collection of threats, real or imagined, that citizens mobilized against, often pressuring the federal government to establish new agencies and utilize new forms of expertise to improve the lives and character of American citizens. For example, the “Pure Food” movement began in the 1870s in response to concerns with public sanitation and the dangers of industrial food production. It gained enough public support to result in legislation in 1906 that would establish government regulation on food, drugs, and

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<sup>40</sup> He implored the Red Cross and private businesses to cover the costs of reconstruction. The Red Cross refused, and the private reconstruction corporations that he helped found all failed. See Barry, *Rising Tide*.

<sup>41</sup> Other scholars, following the work of Michele Foucault, have labeled these kinds of trends as the “governmentalization of the state.” For example, see Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, Second Edition (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2010).

cosmetics through what is now known as the Food and Drug Administration.<sup>42</sup> A similar movement, often with overlapping personnel, viewed prostitution as a hazard to both public health and morality, and stirred a moral panic around the fabled existence of “white slavery” within brothels. By 1910, this panic crystalized into a larger “social hygiene” movement which sought to eradicate red-light districts through a combination of civic initiatives and expanding the power of the federal government. Though they did not stop prostitution, they left a legacy of state growth and a new government agenda. These changes included new regulatory bodies, laws, legal precedents, and a bureaucratic agency tasked with federal crime-fighting, which would latter change its name to the Federal Bureau of Investigations.<sup>43</sup>

Just years after the social hygiene movement targeted red-light districts, that same coalition of neo-Puritans and Progressives turned their attention toward alcohol. Like prostitution, the new temperance movement viewed drinking as a threat to the family, public health, the war effort, and the economic productivity and moral character of individuals. They successfully lobbied the federal government to outlaw alcohol and establish laws and regulatory agencies designed to transform the leisure habits of citizens. What followed was the era of Prohibition (1920-1933), a rapid expansion of government power to destroy the wealthy liquor industry, and a shift towards using the federal government to shape the everyday lives of citizens for their betterment. In their tactics, this movement established a number of federal agencies with incredible reach and

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<sup>42</sup> James Harvey Young, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>43</sup> Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 258.

spending, along with legal precedents that would overrule state laws for federal ones during a period that included the 1927 flood. It was not just an expansion of federal power, but a shift in the goals of rule toward changing the habits of the population for the sake of public health and economic prosperity.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from these bottom-up pressures to expand federal power and extend its goals toward the health and well-being of the American citizenry, World War I instigated top-down efforts to similar ends.<sup>45</sup> For example, President Wilson created the US Food Administration in order to feed the incredible number of soldiers fighting in Europe. This initiative resulted in a two-year period wherein the Federal government took control over domestic food production, and sought to cultivate a culture of donations and rationing among American civilians. A civilian's eating habits were made into an embodiment of patriotism, according to the Food Administration's propaganda. Hoover himself led the agency in his first role as a public official.<sup>46</sup>

These bottom-up and top-down attempts to manage civilian life for its betterment established the context in which Hoover could make a political spectacle out of a disaster. He was no lone pioneer in expanding government power and changing its aims. He

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<sup>44</sup> Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 222-349. For other examples of such public health movements, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> On the historical relationship between war-making and the creation of administrative bodies, see Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A 990-1992*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 67-95.

<sup>46</sup> As a private businessman in London, he had helped orchestrate charities and inter-state agreements for famine relief in Europe in the first years of World War I. See George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918* (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996); and Neil O. Buschman, "The United States Food Administration During World War I: The Rise of Activist Government Through Food Control During Mobilization for Total War," Masters Thesis, (Auburn, Alabama, 2013).

merely helped extend this increasingly common logic of government to yet another problem threatening American citizens.

### **The Flood**

The Mississippi River has always flooded its banks, but to varying degrees of destruction. The cultivation of its flood plains in the mid-and-late 1800s put a lot more human life and property in the way of these flood waters, setting the stage for large-scale disasters. In response to the destruction of multiple floods, Congress began funding the construction of levees in 1849 to contain the waters and deepen the river to better facilitate shipping lanes for commerce. But the apparent safety provided by these levees only encouraged human settlement in riskier areas, and subsequent floods in 1851, 1874, and 1882 destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes.

The 1927 flood was historic in size, engulfing the newly settled farmlands across several states, but primarily in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The water covered 27,000 square miles, in depths of up to thirty feet. The flooding lasted for months, dominating the front pages of the national press throughout the time period.<sup>47</sup> There was no conflict between local boosters and the national press in whether and how to cover this event. Much of the destruction occurred in rural areas where boosters were absent. The economic interests of those land owners depended upon keeping poor, African American

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<sup>47</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, Chapter 23.



share-croppers in place to work the fields,<sup>48</sup> not upon managing the national reputation of the land in the eyes of prospective investors. Moreover, like Galveston, the capacity of local actors to manage the devastation was overwhelmed by the scale of the destruction.

Like those of Galveston, the local politicians of flooded areas immediately appealed to the Federal government for aid in various forms. President Coolidge initially rejected these requests. A look at their pleas reveals how they imagined, or hoped, that the federal government would act during an emergency. They did not point to an established duty of government to respond to the disaster, such as the aforementioned congressional precedents of providing relief to disaster victims. Rather, they asked the President to help advertise that they were in the midst of a national emergency, encouraging the masses to mobilize and donate. After being rebuffed twice, the governor of Mississippi's third plea to Coolidge articulates their reasoning clearly: "Your coming would center eyes of the nation and the consequent publicity would result in securing millions of dollars of additional aid for sufferers."<sup>49</sup> NBC similarly asked Coolidge to make use of their new radio networks to appeal for donations from the national public. But he continued to refuse all of these overtures to take part in the fundraising efforts.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Robyn Spencer, "Contested Terrain: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor," *The Journal of Negro History*, 79 no. 2 (1994): 170-181.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> His political opponents saw it as an opportunity to attack him. Then-New York State-Senator Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) attacked Coolidge publicly on this issue, while advising his democratic allies to pass a generous relief package so as to present their party as more attentive to the needs of flood victims. See David Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood: The Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) 41.

After a few major levees collapsed and intensified the flooding, Coolidge finally gave in to calls for federal support. He appointed then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to lead a relief effort. As America's first "disaster czar," Hoover embraced and further emphasized this understanding of the flood as a national emergency. Though he sought to oversee the efforts and coordinate from above, Hoover saw the national public as an important resource for funding, and locals who were directly affected by flood as the "boots on the ground" for his plan.

Hoover sought to frame the role of government and civilians during a national emergency through his actions and in some of his public addresses during the event. For example, he took advantage of the emerging mass publics created by radio to give an address, which was also transcribed and circulated in the national newspapers, reaching audiences beyond the metropolitan limits of radio towers at the time.<sup>51</sup> Here, I quote from large sections of this address to demonstrate how he framed the event as an ongoing emergency that requires mass mobilization of civilians and officials, blending the language of war with that of progressive visions of collective power.<sup>52</sup> In rhetoric that resembles a national leader trying to mobilize a population for battle, he describes on the radio what "nature" has done to "our country:"

I am speaking from Memphis, the temporary headquarters which we have established for the national fight against the most dangerous flood our country has ever known in its history. We, here, in the midst of the scene, are humble before

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<sup>51</sup> On the role of radio in the 1927 flood, and the 1937 Ohio River Flood, see Welkey, *The Thousand Year Flood*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> The following quotes are from his radio address, as transcribed in the New York Times. "Hoover Appeals for Aid Over Radio," *New York Times*, May 1, 1927, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1927/05/01/96643618.html?pageNumber=2>.

such an outburst of the forces of nature and the futility of man in their control, but we have the obligation to fight its invasion and to relieve its destruction....

A futile collective struggle in the face of the awesome “forces of nature,” Hoover described a situation that was simultaneously hopeless, and yet held opportunity for heroic action. He goes on to depict a situation in which massive destruction has already occurred, and yet more may follow unless they stop it. For example, he describes how the flood “poured water up to twenty feet deep over several counties, an area up to 150 miles long and up to 50 miles wide.” In another passage, he emphasizes that the effort to stop the *ongoing* destruction is happening even as he speaks: “all along the levees a gigantic battle is in progress to raise them before the crest is reached.” He continues:

The United States engineers and the local communities have thousands of men, strung mile upon miles, working in long strings like ants piling the levees higher and higher... It is a great battle against the oncoming rush, and in every home behind the battle line there is apprehension and anxiety...

...It is difficult to picture in words the might of the Mississippi in flood. To say that two blocks from where I stand it is at this minute flowing at a rate ten times that of Niagara seems unimpressive. Perhaps it becomes more impressive to say that at Vicksburg the flood is 6,000 feet wide and 50 feet deep, rushing on at the rate of six miles an hour. A week ago when it broke the levees at Mounds Landing, only a quarter of the river went through the hole. Yet in a week it poured water up to twenty feet deep over several counties...flooding out 150,000 people.

In spite of this “futility of man in their control,” Hoover lionized the synergy of official engineers and “local communities:” “Everything humanly possible is being done by men of magnificent courage and skill.” He does so while simultaneously imploring every American citizen to donate to the American Red Cross relief fund to serve the masses represented in his population figures.

Some historians read Hoover (and Coolidge's) framing of these events as the praising of volunteerism and a rebuke to big-government ideals.<sup>53</sup> What gets lost in this binary of statism-versus-volunteerism is how Hoover's approach was fundamentally rooted in a new vision of what human organization can achieve, regardless of the actors mobilized. Just as he appealed to the dual power of government engineering and volunteerism to serve Americans during the national emergency, Hoover also envisioned a way to engineer from above the actions of everyday people to solve the challenge of reconstruction.

Overseeing this next phase, he drew from his progressive ideals to implement a series of human engineering projects. His organization would create 154 impromptu cities to host the hundreds of thousands of refugees, some with as many as twenty thousand people. Not only were they creating basic infrastructure to house and feed these populations, but they also used the camps as spaces to set refugees on the path of self-improvement.<sup>54</sup> For example, Hoover's programs provided instruction for how to be healthier and more industrious in the future. The historian John Barry provides a list of such interventions, where courses and workshops for the captive audiences taught them "how to sew, make soap, can vegetables, raise poultry, protect cistern water from mosquitoes, use a toothbrush, bathe, [and] treat gonorrhea."<sup>55</sup> Such activity demonstrates

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<sup>53</sup> For example, see Gareth Davies, "Book Review: Disaster and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected," *Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics*, 12, no. 1 (2014): 191-197.

<sup>54</sup> Kendrick A. Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary 1918-1928*, (NY: New York City, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 376.

<sup>55</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, Chapter 31.

how those same concerns with promoting the health and well-being of the population that we saw at the local level after the Galveston Hurricane were now being integrated into the federal government's disaster response by Hoover's coalition, just as they were being integrated into other federal projects, like the fight against brothels and alcohol.

Hoover used these interventions to bolster his public standing as a national leader. He already had the public reputation as "the Great Humanitarian" from his experience coordinating famine relief in Europe during the first years of World War I. But he was now an aspiring national politician obsessed with his public image, seeking to use these acts of engineering as signs of his fitness for office.

During his reign as America's disaster czar, he had staff keep summaries of all of the editorials that were evaluating his work over the relief efforts.<sup>56</sup> The content of these evaluations underscores the political capital he was gaining by being seen as coordinating the response to the national emergency. The national press fawned over his "efficient" managerial skills in the face of "emergency," and ignored his apparent flaws. For example, foreshadowing what today is a regular feature of governments responding to disasters, Hoover regularly deflated the flood's casualty numbers in his speeches, presenting a much safer, healthier population of disaster victims than reality would allow.<sup>57</sup>

Deflating the body count was just one part of a larger strategy of generating political capital by gaining a reputation as the guardian of public well-being during an

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

emergency. Electoral politics made the plight of African Americans after the flood decisive to Hoover's political future. The emerging Progressive movement was a powerful constituency for his rise to power, and many of its vocal members, including Teddy Roosevelt, had made the enfranchisement of African Americans in the south a central campaign issue. African Americans themselves also had electoral sway because of they tended to vote as a bloc in the Republican primaries. For this reason, historian John Barry writes, "Publicity over [Hoover's] handling of the flood had virtually created his candidacy, but it could evaporate in a moment if the seeming triumph exploded in scandal. A scandal over race in particular would make both the party's Progressives and its African American politicians desert."<sup>58</sup>

A scandal did arise when reports emerged documenting the terrible treatment of African American refugees in flooded areas. The vast majority of African Americans displaced by the floods had been sharecroppers, working under white landowners for an annual share of the profits from each year's crops on the newly settled flood plain. When the flood hit, white land owners feared their African American labor force would flee, leaving their livelihoods impossible without access to African American bodies to work the fields. Following their bottom line, landowners leaned on those directing the relief effort to ensure that African American "refugees" were not allowed to leave the relief camps, in some cases shooting those who tried to escape. Similarly, these same refugees were forced to work in the rebuilding efforts, often at gun-point, for a dollar a day. The African American national press and the NAACP investigated such reports,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Chapter 26.

communicating to a national audience that these displaced African Americans were comparing their station in relief effort to slavery.<sup>59</sup> The white national press picked up these stories and repeated the claims for a broader audience.<sup>60</sup> In an attempt to protect his reputation, Hoover created a commission of sixteen prominent African American men and women to investigate the charges, all of whom were from the relatively conservative Tuskegee Institute, and none from the more radical NAACP that was drawing attention to the discrimination. These public figures in the African American community protected Hoover's reputation from the accusations of discrimination, in the hope that he would be an ally to African Americans once he took the White House.<sup>61</sup>

Even while Hoover was inadvertently demonstrating to the national public the appeal of federal leadership in responding to national emergencies, and its expanded goals of reshaping civilian life in the recovery effort, such a message was being contested by other loud voices. For example, President Coolidge used his 1927 State of the Union Address to frame the public's understanding of what he called "a national disaster." In doing so, Coolidge rejected federal responsibility for providing more than just immediate aid, emphasizing that such suffering is inevitable and it is not the job of the federal government to protect people from such hazards, nor to help them recover their losses. He begins by celebrating the nation-wide mobilization in the face of emergency:

It is necessary to look upon this emergency as a national disaster. It has been so treated from its inception. Our whole people have provided with great generosity

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<sup>59</sup> Spencer, "Contested Terrain," 170-181.

<sup>60</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, Chapter 26.

<sup>61</sup> They would be disappointed, and Hoover would later lose his re-election bid without the support of the African American voting bloc.

for its relief. Most of the departments of the Federal Government have been engaged in the same effort. The governments of the afflicted areas, both State and municipal, cannot be given too high praise for the courageous and helpful way in which they have come to the rescue of the people. If the sources directly chargeable cannot meet the demand, the National Government should not fail to provide generous relief.

But he then goes on to emphasize how this role of the state must be limited to the moment of emergency, and not the longer road of recovery, effectively disavowing Hoover's reconstruction effort:

This, however, does not mean restoration. The Government is not an insurer of its citizens against the hazard of the elements. We shall always have flood and drought, heat and cold, earthquake and wind, lightning and tidal wave, which are all too constant in their afflictions. The Government does not undertake to reimburse its citizens for loss and damage incurred under such circumstances. It is chargeable, however, with the rebuilding of public works and the humanitarian duty of relieving its citizens from distress.<sup>62</sup>

But Coolidge's position was not accepted by the public. John Barry notes that there was now widespread public sentiment that the Federal government should be responsible for serving its citizens in times of disaster. This notion culminated in the 1928 Flood Control Act, which authorized the US Army Corps of Engineers to manage the nation's major water-ways for flood mitigation. The scale of this public works project was unprecedented: "[it] would cost more than anything the government had ever done except fight World War I."<sup>63</sup>

Once President, another disaster would provide Hoover with an opportunity to gain popularity during a national emergency. His reputation had suffered greatly from

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<sup>62</sup> Calvin Coolidge, "State of the Union Address," December 6, 1927, <https://www.infoplease.com/primary-sources/government/presidential-speeches/state-union-address-calvin-coolidge-december-6-1927>.

<sup>63</sup> John M. Barry, "After the Deluge," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2005, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/after-the-deluge-111555373/>.



the fallout of the stock market 1929, and political observers at the time expected him to recover from this by re-establishing his role as “the Great Humanitarian” in the face of the Great Drought of 1930. The dramatic lack of rain was destroying crops and bringing death in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. The editors of the *New Republic* optimistically wrote that the drought represented “an opportunity [for Hoover] to play again the role which he knows by heart, and in which the public fancies him... this is bound to restore a certain amount of the confidence which he has lost...”<sup>64</sup>

As public officials and citizens wrote to Hoover imploring him to act, he ordered a survey of the damage and told the nation that he would rapidly deploy a relief operation. But he faced a dilemma in doing so. Hoover was weary of what he regarded as statism, using large, federal bureaucracies and passing new laws to solve local problems. He believed such institutions stepped on American character, specifically self-government, individual initiative, or “movements of collective self-help.” However, like the Mississippi Flood of 1927, it was clear that local communities were overwhelmed with the scale of the disaster and urgently needed help.

Hoover’s attempted solution to this dilemma was to create a hierarchical bureaucracy that sought to supply, organize, and direct the efforts of local communities. The “self-help Drought Relief Program” included several tiers of authority, such as Federal officials, along with state-level relief committees appointed by the governor. The latter included business representatives from banks, railways, farmers, and the American

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<sup>64</sup> “The Week,” *The New Republic*, August 20, 1930. As cited in David E. Hamilton, “Herbert Hoover and the Great Drought of 1930,” *The Journal of American History*, 68, no. 4 (1982): 851.

Red Cross. These state-level committees would then appoint county-level committees made up of local business leaders, bankers, farmers, and an agricultural agent. The more local actors were to determine the need on the ground, and the state and federal-level committees were to provide the necessary supplies and organize the logistics. Hoover believed that such a federated system would tackle the emergency need for aid, without threatening the self-government of local communities. The press initially agreed. The *Nation* praised Hoover for effectively organizing in the face of this national emergency: “Mr. Hoover is not a man to be stampeded by a national disaster, and his attitude toward the present crisis seems to us to have been eminently sensible.”<sup>65</sup>

But this distribution of responsibilities proved to be underfunded, as Hoover insisted that the American Red Cross, through charitable donations, foot most of the bill. The Red Cross was unable or unwilling to do so. Congressional representatives from drought-stricken states insisted on new legislation that would appropriate federal funding to fill these financial gaps. Hoover was adamantly opposed, insisting that the problem would be solved through private charity. In the following public address in which he denounces these representatives, he downplays the danger facing the drought victims, and insists that the democratic, national character of America would be undermined if the federal government were to allocate more money to the cause:

This is not an issue as to whether people shall go hungry or cold in the United States. It is solely a question of the best method by which hunger and cold shall be prevented. It is a question as to whether the American people on one hand will maintain the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government as distinguished on the other hand from

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<sup>65</sup> “The Great Drought,” *The Nation*, August 20, 1930. As cited in David E. Hamilton, “Herbert Hoover and the Great Drought of 1930,” 858.

appropriations out of the Federal Treasury for such purposes. My own conviction is strongly that if we break down this sense of responsibility of individual generosity to individual and mutual self-help in the country in times of national difficulty and if we start appropriations of this character we have not only impaired something infinitely valuable in the life of the American people but have struck at the roots of self-government. Once this has happened it is not the cost of a few score millions, but we are faced with the abyss of reliance in future upon Government charity in some form or other. The money involved is indeed the least of the costs to American ideals and American institutions.<sup>66</sup>

Hoover would eventually give in, agreeing to a compromised bill that offered twenty million, as opposed to the proposed sixty million dollars of funding. But this amount also proved to be too little. In refusing to do more, Hoover greatly damaged his public image. Rather than living up to the title of “the Great Humanitarian,” his performance in the face of the drought matched that of his response to the stock market crash. He was painted as a negligent, ultra-conservative by his opponents. Democratic propagandists seized on this episode, playing up the agricultural calamity of the drought and giving his name to some of its features, like calling rabbits “Hoover hogs,”<sup>67</sup> just as they would call homeless encampments “Hoovervilles.” Hoover’s rise and eventual fall in the public eye underscored the political capital to be gained by using government power to respond to national emergencies.

### **The New Deal and the Great Society**

The public scandal over Hoover’s handling of the Great Drought foreshadowed his defeat by FDR and the New Dealers. They tapped the appeal of expanding state

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<sup>66</sup> Herbert Hoover, “Statement on Unemployment Relief,” February 3, 1931, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-3-1931-statement-unemployment-relief>.

<sup>67</sup> David Hamilton, “Herbert Hoover and the Great Drought of 1930,” 875.

power to protect citizens from hardship and used it as a political platform, making campaign talking points out of both ecological and economic catastrophes. People like Senator Bob La Follette and FDR would cite examples of federal aid to disaster victims in America's past as if they were established traditions of a social contract, arguing that such responses to "natural" disasters should be expanded to include "economic disasters."<sup>68</sup> Though in doing so, they were really inventing a tradition of government responsibility, rather than citing one.<sup>69</sup> As already discussed, aid to disaster victims had been irregular and contested within Congress.

When Hoover lost his re-election to FDR, he was facing a candidate that touted the power of centralized administration and its capacity to respond to national emergencies. When referring to what is today called the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, and what FDR called the "economic disaster" or "national disaster," he articulated his vision for a new social contract: "government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which are protection of the family and the home, the establishment of a democracy of opportunity and aid to those overtaken by disaster."<sup>70</sup> In his words, the power of the federal government to plan projects should be tapped to provide, "security against the hazards and vicissitudes of life," providing "safeguards against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in

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<sup>68</sup> On the framing wars of the New Dealers and their citation of previous congressional responses to disaster, see Dauber, *The Sympathetic State*. There were other precedents to the New Deal social welfare programs which applied to specific subgroups of Americans, not all citizens. These included social provisions for freed slaves and veterans after the Civil War, and later women and children in the Progressive era. See Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.

<sup>69</sup> See Gareth Davies, "Review of *The Sympathetic State*."

<sup>70</sup> Dauber, *The Sympathetic State*, 120.

this man-made world of ours.” In framing these hazards, FDR used the same term as Coolidge did for the Mississippi Flood, a “national disaster.” But unlike Coolidge, he framed it as a problem to be solved through central planning, as opposed to Hoover’s mixed-bag of private and public institutions: “We no longer believe that human beings hit by flood, drought, unemployment, or any other national disaster should be left to themselves with the sole help of such charity as may be available to them.”<sup>71</sup>

Beyond the rhetoric, FDR established a large collection of federal agencies that took on disaster response and mitigation in the executive branch, and like Hoover, he sought to mobilize civilian volunteers. Congress would no longer be the primary site for how the US government took on disasters. For example, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was established to be the new purse of rebuilding public works after disasters, while other already-existing agencies were given authority to fund disaster recovery or mitigation. Meanwhile, the Civil Defense Corp was created to prepare everyday people for Axis attacks on American soil, training tens of millions of citizens to be first-responders to chemical spills, black-outs, and bombings. While the Corp was never used to respond to such events during WWII, it served as an institutional model for government-volunteer responses to future calamities under the Cold-War Civil Defense agencies, and later, FEMA.<sup>72</sup>

Once in power, the New Dealers did not just change how the state pursued its goals. They capitalized on the symbolic power of these new ends of government, using

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<sup>71</sup> The above quotes are from Ibid., 117-120.

<sup>72</sup> See Roberts, *Disasters and the American State*, 41-69.

their interventions as advertisements for their own fitness for rule. For example, David Welky points out how rural development programs, centered on the taming of rivers, were a central feature of the New Deal. Federally funded dams, canals, and the like brought jobs, electricity, and environmental conservation to impoverished communities. But they also popularized this new form of government power: the river management programs acted as “physical advertisements for the New Deal.”<sup>73</sup> For example, the Nooris Dam was named after Senator George Norris, a Republican progressive who supported FDR’s candidacy against Hoover. Other dams were photographed or illustrated, to be printed on propaganda posters supporting FDR, and later, emphasizing how such projects support the new war effort.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, as the Supreme Court was ruling on the Tennessee Valley Authority’s (TVA) monopolistic practices, the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project, which funded artistic performances as a public works program, put on the play *Power*, which dramatized the value of energy production to consumers.<sup>75</sup> Energy production just happened to be one of the selling points of the TVA.

While I have emphasized the political power that FDR and the New Dealers had to gain from these advertisements, it also appears to have been a sincere expression of their political ideology. In discussing the plans for the TVA with his engineers, FDR

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<sup>73</sup> David Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood*, 53.

<sup>74</sup> For example, the cover of a New Deal propaganda periodical, “the Roosevelt Record” put a photograph of a TVA dam on its front cover. See “The Roosevelt Record: A New Deal in Facts,” 1:15, (New York City, NY: 1936).

<sup>75</sup> Library of Congress, “Collection: Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939,” <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/about-this-collection/>.

spoke of “setting an example of [social and environmental] planning, not just for ourselves, but for generations to come... What we are doing [with the TVA] is ... trying to make a different type of citizen.”<sup>76</sup> These “new citizens” would form the popular base for further reforms, pushing against the interests of the then-severely weakened “capitalists and financiers” that were lobbying against the New Deal reforms.<sup>77</sup>

Like Hoover, the New Dealers were held accountable to this new vision of state power during the next national emergency. Occurring while their policies were in full swing, the public response to the 1937 flood of the Ohio River illustrates how dissidents made the destruction into an occasion for framing national citizenship and contesting the legitimacy of FDR’s performance. The flood stretched across multiple states, causing approximately eight billion dollars in damages, killing 285 people, and leaving one million homeless. By this time, radio had become a much more common mode of consuming the news, and several stations began dedicating constant coverage of the event. As Welky puts it, “[the flood] became everyone’s crisis as audiences everywhere experienced the woes of its actual victims.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur E. Morgan, “Bench-marks in the Tennessee Valley,” Reprinted from *Survey Graphic*, (January, March, and May 1934), 8; as cited in James C. Scott, “High Modernist Social Engineering: The Case of the Tennessee Valley Authority,” in *Experiencing the State*, ed. Lloyd I. Rudolph and John Kurt Jacobsen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Lowitt, “The TVA, 1933-1945,” in *TVA: Fifty Years of Grass-roots Democracy*, ed. Edwin C. Hargrove and Paul K. Conkin, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1983), 56; as cited in Scott, “High-Modernist Social Engineering,” 28.

<sup>78</sup> Welky, 122.

The public response to the flood shows a great deal of blame-making.<sup>79</sup> Some ministers and authors insisted that the flood, like depressions, wars, and other natural disasters, was God's punishment for the nation's public vices, such as drinking alcohol, gambling, and greed. Others provided causal explanations blaming human technology: airplanes caused the downpours; dams caused the overflows, they speculated. But the politically charged narratives mostly implicated the federal government. One prominent correspondent saw the floods as an instance of inequality, blaming FDR for ignoring the Ohio River valley: "you have been so engrossed singing the praises of the TVA citizens in other river valleys are left to drown." Similarly, a widely re-printed editorial attacked FDR for not living up to his own vision of the protection that "civilized nations" provide their citizens: "There is no reason why Americans should suffer from the floods like the Chinese, when we have the wealth, the will, and the skill to control them."<sup>80</sup> These critics were accusing the New Dealers of failing to follow through with their own vision for America's new social contract.

In response, a debate ensued over how, not whether, the federal government should control the nation's rivers to prevent future disasters. Some advocated moving major cities out of the path of future floods. But there was a much broader agreement and public pressure behind the notion that the proper response required the state to

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<sup>79</sup> This instance of politicization challenges the general conclusions of Davies, who argues that the media coverage of major disasters as late as the 1950s was largely absent of discussion of trauma, mistakes, inequalities, or winners and losers. Speculating that there was an air of optimism around the new capacities of rational administration, he argues that media tended to remark upon how much worse things could have been, but for the achievements of good planning and an organized recovery effort. See Gareth Davies, "Pre-Modern Disaster Politics: Combating Catastrophe in the 1950s," *Publis: The Journal of Federalism*, 47, no. 2 (2017): 260-281.

<sup>80</sup> Welky, 225-226



intervene and protect these cities from future floods. A political battle ensued over how to provide this protection. The Army Corp of Engineers wanted to build upon their experience with the Mississippi River, establishing a series of levees and spill-ways. The Corps advocated for this plan out of fear of losing their jurisdiction over the river ways. One congressmen who supported this option similarly invoked Hoover's militaristic language to denounce those contemplating abandoning flood-prone areas: "I oppose retreat; I oppose the abject surrender of progress and advancement to the rule and reign of the beasts of the forest and of the jungle."<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, FDR and his New Deal allies in Congress wanted a more comprehensive plan than just flood control. They sought to create a series of "mini TVAs" across the country, which combined flood control with economic development and soil conservation, all under the jurisdiction of a central planning body. While the Army Corps of Engineers wanted to wall off the forces of nature, and be in charge of those walls, the New Dealers wanted to channel these forces to deliver on much broader aspects of progress. But FDR's attention and priorities were directed toward other events, and the Army Corps' position would win out, establishing the Flood Control Act of 1937.<sup>82</sup> The New Dealers failed in their effort to pass policy that would link this project to social and economic development goals. But for our purposes, noteworthy is that both proposals took as their starting point that it was now the federal government's responsibility to protect civilians from future disasters.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 236.

As the experience of Hoover and FDR demonstrate, new visions and experiments in organization emerged for dissidents and officials to draw from in making sense out of national emergencies. Hoover rode the progressive wave, using the Mississippi Flood to build his public reputation as a leader who could successfully wield federal power to achieve goals that had been beyond the purview of government, such as helping victims of disaster not just survive, but rebuild or even improve their lives. For this, he rejected a fully centralized response, insisting that these goals could be achieved through some kind of synergy between local, state, and federal government, along with private businesses and charities. FDR's promise for America's New Deal would frame such goals as a feature of citizenship, a new guarantee from the government, pursued instead through central planning. The competitions over public meaning-making following large-scale natural disasters would increasingly raise the question of what more the federal government can and should do in the face of national emergencies, implicating the legitimacy of the government and its policy platform.

The political potency of national emergencies and these new visions of citizenship is further underscored by how they shaped other hot-button issues in American politics. For example, the failure to control a large wildfire in Malibu, California in 1956 implicated the legitimacy of the entire Civil Defense establishment. That program had been marketed to the American public as protection against "all-hazards," whether nuclear war or natural disasters. But the apparent inability of the Civil-Defense system to extinguish the blaze before it created, in Eisenhower's words, a "fire disaster of a national scope," raised questions of its ability to protect Americans in case of a Soviet nuclear attack. Seeking to quell such concerns, Congress took up debates over how to provide

“complete fire prevention and protection,” and the Eisenhower administration, in spite of its insistence on “small-government,” authorized massive public spending to subsidize rebuilding suburbs in what were, and still are today, fire-prone areas in Southern California.<sup>83</sup>

A more consequential example for the politics of disasters was the political battle that resulted in legislation which would lead to the establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Local activists and politicians weaponized the political capital of national emergencies of the 1960s to pressure the Nixon Administration into passing legislation that would put disaster response in the hands of the federal government. After a series of tornadoes tore through the Mid-West and killed 140 people in 1965, Indiana Senator Bayh remarked that the local state response was a mere “Band-Aid” by virtue of its limited funding, and needed the purse of the Federal government.<sup>84</sup> His concern gained him more allies when Hurricane Camille hit Mississippi and caused major flooding in Virginia, killing 259 people. Senator Muskie of Maine joined him in publicizing the shortcomings and racial discrimination of disaster relief by local agencies. Civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, which had already mobilized in the south to fight segregation, began working with Bayh and Muskie to document cases of racial discrimination in the provision of disaster aid. They targeted

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<sup>83</sup> Quote from Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 404; as cited in Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 1998). On the role of the civil defense initiative in expanding federal influence on local disasters, see Roberts, *Disasters and the American State*, 41-69.

<sup>84</sup> Morris, “Hurricane Camille and the New Politics of Federal Disaster,” 410.

government agents, both local and federal, as well as the Red Cross, which had a government mandate to provide individual-level assistance.

This campaign culminated in a public hearing in Biloxi, Mississippi, one of the areas hit hardest by Hurricane Camille. The hearings highlighted for the national press the lack and inequalities of aid, and gave an opportunity for the Senators to make public a proposal which would become the Disaster Relief Act of 1970. There were two main oppositions to this act. The first came from the congressmen who had until then enjoyed the political capital of getting individual bills passed for their disaster victim constituents. Making federal money automatic, as opposed to the accomplishment of a local politician, threatened their local popularity.

The second opposing group was the Nixon administration. Ever the opportunist, President Nixon had distributed disaster aid during a drought in Texas after a local politician convinced him that it would demonstrate his decisive leadership and compassion.<sup>85</sup> But he was opposed to institutionalizing this federal role through new legislation. As Bob Hope held a large public fundraiser for victims of Hurricane Camille, Nixon's speech writer, Ray Price, wrote Hope a letter, which Nixon signed, highlighting the ability of victims to "bounce back," and, referring to their placing American flags on their own rubble, he insists, "we should be as proud that they are Americans as they are to be Americans."<sup>86</sup> In the same letter, he states that aid is more meaningful as something performed extemporaneously by the people, and not by government: "This

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<sup>85</sup> Gareth Davies, "The Changing Presidential Politics of Disaster," 244.

<sup>86</sup> Ray Price to President Nixon, "Suggested Remarks by the President on the Bob Hope Telethon," *Nixon Presidential Library*, August 24, 1969.

[volunteerism] is the kind of help that means more than anything Government can give, because it comes from the heart—and by giving it so generously, those people are showing that the heart of America is good.” His letter included a financial donation from him and his cabinet, which he provided while resisting the coalition of Senators and civil rights groups that were pushing for federal funding and oversight of disaster response.

Nixon eventually gave in under the public pressure generated by the public hearings in Biloxi. He signed the 1970 Disaster Relief Act, which provided the template for the later acts that would establish FEMA under the Carter administration. FEMA itself was simply the consolidation of the many, often over-lapping, administrative bodies created in the decades since FDR to fund and organize disaster response at the federal level.

Disasters were not unique in this respect. The expansion of government power for new ends was happening in other arenas during the Great Society era, which saw the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the War on Poverty, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare, the Clean Air Act, water pollution control, and wilderness legislation.<sup>87</sup> Thus this form of local patronage was undone by the high-minded ideas of the Great Society initiative at the level of Congress and its alliances with Civil Rights organizations who were fighting the exclusion of African American communities from disaster relief on the ground.<sup>88</sup> The progressive visions of what human organization can accomplish during a national emergency became defining features of

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, “Hurricane Camille and the New Politics of Federal Disaster.”

American citizenship, moving from the campaign promises of the New Deal, to the laws of the land in the 1960s.

### **Conclusion: National Emergencies and the Contestation of Citizenship**

Natural disasters have not always been treated as spectacles of government success or failure. Crucial to the political spectacles of disasters today is the discourse of “national emergency,” a way of thinking about agency and solidarity in sudden cataclysms happening elsewhere. Also crucial is a new way of thinking about citizenship, namely that those suffering in emergency are entitled to help, whether from their fellow citizens or the federal government, or some combination of the two. In these contexts, political capital is made out of the representation of efficiency, efficacy, and care in the face of emergency. It is why, in times of emergency, political entrepreneurs focus on body counts, the amount of aid provided, and stories of solidarity, or its reverse, discrimination against disaster victims.

These new ways of thinking about citizenship were not monolithic. Religious interpretations of the causes of the disasters and the appropriate response to them persisted. Moreover, there was a fundamental ambiguity over who was capable of looking after the victims of disaster. As a progressive, Hoover embraced the role, envisioning a nation in which emergencies were addressed through a synergy of volunteerism, private businesses, and the guidance of a well-coordinated government hierarchy. FDR similarly advocated for a government-run approach, but was less concerned with the notion that such top-down interventions would corrupt the people it

served. He advocated for a model of state power that fully embraced the charge of central planning, with a much more explicit mandate for funding environmental conservation and economic development than Hoover.

This ambiguity gave political entrepreneurs a great deal of latitude in their ability to frame state responsibility during a national emergency. When Eisenhower fully federalized the official disaster response system in 1950, he echoed Hoover's appeal to the synergy of federal power and local response efforts.

Federal government should be kept always...as a partner, to participate in a helpful way, but to keep the maximum responsibility and direction of action of operations in the local scene. Only in that way I believe can we get the efficiency and the economy that come from someone who is spending his own time—sometimes his own money—in the project...

Moreover, in 1955 Eisenhower responded to Hurricane Diane by supporting federal funding to rebuild public infrastructure, while insisting that relief to individuals be funded through the Red Cross. In what appears to be a rebuke of FDR's speech about civilization meaning the protection of people from the vicissitudes of life, Ike stated that,

The great real disasters that threatens to engulf us when we are unready as a nation, as a people, to meet personal disaster by our own cheerful giving... [There is a] misunderstanding that government is taking the place even of rescuing the person, the individual and the family from his natural disasters.<sup>89</sup>

He later signed the Federal Flood Insurance Act in 1956, again insisting that this was not an expansion of government responsibility but a means for helping "our private system" to absorb rebuilding costs. In spite of Eisenhower's assurances, in the next decade the federal government would finally begin to spend a great deal more on disaster response

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<sup>89</sup> Gareth Davies, "Pre-Modern Disaster Politics," 266-267.

than would the American Red Cross, a rate of increasing spending that has consistently risen, regardless of which party is in office.<sup>90</sup>

All of these presidents were embracing the idea that national emergencies were not just an avenue of solving humanitarian problems. These events were unplanned political spectacles, and therefore an arena of political opportunity. Hoover and FDR clearly saw national emergencies as ways of gaining political support and attaching these new visions of citizenship to a more specific political agenda, whether it be Hoover's progressivism or FDR's New Deal. Indeed, viewing the federal government as capable of providing security and welfare in the face of disasters made it possible for people to advocate for institutionalizing this role, making protection from the forces of nature a feature of citizenship, rather than just a gift of charity for the innocent people who suffered. The coalition of Senators and civil rights advocates seized upon national emergencies to embarrass the Nixon administration into federalizing the official disaster response system, against Nixon's conviction that this should be the role of charity. While this kind of activity might seem normal to a contemporary reader familiar with the political scandals surrounding events like Hurricane Katrina, such political battles are actually quite specific to our historical circumstances in recent decades. As the next chapter shows, this evolution of the politics of disaster is not unique to the US.

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<sup>90</sup> Roberts, *Disaster and the American State*, 77.



**CHAPTER 3:**  
**HOW NATURAL DISASTERS BECAME UNPLANNED POLITICAL**  
**SPECTACLES IN OMAN**

The incredible destruction dealt to the Omani coast by Cyclone Gonu in 2007 created a political battlefield that looks a lot like what we see in the US after a large-scale disasters today. Omani dissidents used the publicity of the flooded neighborhoods and torn roads as an occasion to air grievances of governmental neglect and poor planning, while other dissidents framed the disaster as a sign that Omani society and the government have strayed from its core moral and political values. The regime itself mobilized to spin the destruction as well, minimizing the casualty count, and emphasizing the national strength and honor on display in the recovery effort. It was an occasion of heightened debate about Oman's collective future and the capacity of the standing government to protect it. In short, despite all the cultural, political, and economic differences between the US and Oman, disasters have become occasions for similar kinds of framing contests around citizenship.

As I showed in the previous chapter, this similarity cannot be explained as basic human responses to disasters. As the cultural and political history of natural disasters in the US demonstrates, it is only recently that such events have implicated the legitimacy of the state, and sparked such contests over meaning. What we are seeing in the US is not a natural response, but a historically constructed one.

In this chapter, I argue that a similar convergence happened in Oman. Omanis, like Americans, show changing interpretations and framings of natural disasters at different points in history. As in the US, the emergence national emergency as frameworks for interpreting disasters, along with new visions for government power, likely explains why these events have recently become occasions for governments to legitimize their rule and for dissidents to contest it. While the reasons these changes occurred in Oman are context-specific, they do share a resemblance to those in the US, including changes in communication technologies and the success of political reformers seeking to hold power over the state by appealing to the promise of protection from economic and environmental hardships.

My argument is built on a number of corroborating primary and secondary sources. The former includes two Omani historical-theological treaties, two archival collections and a number of other British imperial documents. It also includes published accounts from British allies to Sultan Qaboos, US diplomatic cables, Omani print media, and oral history interviews.<sup>1</sup> However, the available documentary record is thinner than I would have liked. Print media appears to have been absent in Oman until the mid-twentieth century, and even then, it was under the control of British-sponsored authorities. Unlike Americans, every-day Omanis did not have local and national newspapers to submit letters to register their views in public, leaving behind a substantial record of public-meaning making. Moreover, the rise of Sultan Qaboos following his 1970 palace coup saw the establishment of a state willing to use force to quell both

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<sup>1</sup> The full citations for these sources are provided below.

separatist rebels and labor dissidents.<sup>2</sup> Surely there are many voices and perspectives that did not make it into the available archive for us to consider, and whose voices did get recorded is likely a function of pre-existing hierarchies that would bias our reading of history.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, parts of my argument here are more tentative than others. On the one hand, the documentary record permits a high degree of confidence in the claim that disasters have been variously politicized throughout Omani history, only recently becoming a problem for the state as they have in the US. On the other hand, my claim that similar cultural and political changes explain that shift is more provisional than my account of the US in the previous chapter. While I have exhausted the archival sources currently available to me, it is likely that future sources will become available as the Omani Ministry of National Heritage makes more historical documents available to researchers.<sup>4</sup>

I begin this chapter by examining the documentary record on natural disasters in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century of Omani history to chart the different discursive frameworks that people used to make sense out of these events prior to the establishment of the current regime in the 1970s. The second section of this chapter explains the shift toward a similar vision of citizenship to that of the United States. I argue that British colonial officers in the mid-twentieth century increasingly saw it to be

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<sup>2</sup> Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); and Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science*, 2, (2002): 87-109.

<sup>4</sup> The Ministry holds a monopoly on most Omani documents which comment on social and political matters of the twentieth century, from which they publish selectively. See Valeri, *Oman*, 141.

within their strategic interests to build an Omani state that would look after the health and prosperity of its population. This effort was part of what they called a “hearts and minds” strategy against anti-colonial forces in the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> It also fit with a growing notion among British imperial officers that political stability requires a modern government committed to the development of its population. The third section examines how this new vision of citizenship tied state legitimacy to its ability to protect Omanis from the forces of nature, making disasters into spectacles of state responsibility and Omani citizenship. The fourth section examines how the politicization of such expectations was shaped by the state’s control of information surrounding natural disasters. The lag-effect of such control prevented Omani citizens from understanding them as national emergencies until the spread of unofficial communication networks, such as social media and internet discussion forums, allowed Omanis to learn about such calamities in real-time, as in Cyclone Gonu.

### **Responsibility and the Public Meaning of Disasters in Oman before Qaboos**

A key claim of this chapter is that Oman saw a major political and cultural shift with the rise of Sultan Qaboos in the 1970s that helps us understand how disasters became theatres of power. In this section, I hope to show a sort of “before” picture of

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<sup>5</sup> By then, the British had a repertoire of cultural warfare tactics developed to undermine nationalist and Marxist movements in other parts of the empire. This repertoire included the control of information in order to isolate the movements from their local base and foreign sympathizers, and propaganda as a means of psychological warfare. The latter was focused on undermining the radical elements of nationalist movements and empowering moderates. For example, some of the same British personnel who designed anti-Marxist propaganda to target the Malayan insurgency (1948-1960) later came to do the same in Oman. On these British strategies of governing what they called “colonial emergencies,” see Frank Furedi, “Creating a Breathing Space: The Political Management of Colonial Emergencies,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21, no. 3 (1993): 89-106. On the overlap in British personnel between Malay and Dhofar, see Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 24.

how ecological ruin figured in how people understood responsibility and membership within larger communities in the face of such ruin. To do so, I analyze the documentary record of the public meaning attributed to natural disasters in Oman prior to the 1970s. Building on albeit partial records, I argue that there is enough corroboration among the available sources to demonstrate that there existed a similar political culture surrounding disasters to that of the US prior to the early 1900s. They were similar in that there was no single framework through which disasters were explained, nor a single understanding of who was capable of, or responsible for responding to them. What documentation does exist shows that while Omanis understood their environment as being shaped by natural forces outside of their control, calamities were placed within different frameworks that appealed to human and divine agency, and therefore questions of moral and political responsibility. But notably absent from this moralizing and politicizing of the causes of disasters is any talk of government responsibilities for aid or recovery, that is, for looking after the well-being of everyday Omanis who are facing environmental hardship.

### **Omani Perspectives**

As is typical to preindustrial societies, both natural and supernatural understandings of the universe appear in the records of Oman. Arab references to the natural forces that shape their environment in the Persian Gulf date back to the tenth century.<sup>6</sup> Omani sea-faring traders of the Indian Ocean were especially interested in the

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<sup>6</sup> G.R. Tibbets, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese, Being a Translation of Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al-bahr wa'l-qawa'id of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi, Together with an Introduction of the History of Arab Navigation* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971). As cited in Mohammed Redha Bhacker, "Cultural Unity of the Gulf and the Indian

mechanics of wind and storms so as to better predict the times for safe and efficient sailing. But it is also true that, like in the United States and other countries, environmental phenomena that caused significant human suffering were also given meaning within more cosmic, supernatural frameworks. Hence, Omani history is not unique in that naturalistic interpretations of the environment existed alongside of the supernatural, attributing significant changes to God, spirits, the stars, and other celestial elements, often with some underlying moral or political meaning. For example, Omani folklore recorded in the early 1970s attributes supernatural origins to the aqueduct systems (*falaj*) that use only gravity to feed water to towns in the interior mountainous areas of Oman.<sup>7</sup> Such regular access to fresh water was essential for larger human settlements to persist in this area prior to the introduction of motorized water delivery systems in the mid-to-late 1970s. Not only did the presence of these aqueducts make life possible, but their varying productivity can bring fortune or great hardship to those who rely upon them. When water would become scarce for subsistence farmers in Oman, prices for irrigation rose and many went into debt, lost their land and herds, or became farm-hands for more wealthy families.<sup>8</sup> While the *falaj* were regularly repaired as needed, some are thought to have been established over a thousand years ago. So long ago, that apparently no one knew how to build them when one ethnographer conducted a

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Ocean,” in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York City, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 164.

<sup>7</sup> John C. Wilkinson, “The Organization of the Falaj Irrigation System in Oman,” *School of Geography, University of Oxford*, 1974. While it was likely the villagers who told him this, Wilkinson does not address who his sources were and from what time period these notions came.

<sup>8</sup> Dale Eickelman, “From Theocracy to Monarchy: Authority and Legitimacy in Inner Oman, 1935-1957,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17, no. 1 (1985) 7-8.

study of their use in the 1970s. The villagers merely inherited them, believing that “the *falaj* are something ‘from God’ and their origins are attributed to the supernatural powers of the legendary Sulayman b. Dau’ud.”<sup>9</sup>

Omanis used these supernatural causal stories to explain large-scale ecological phenomena that affected people’s livelihood, as was the case with rain and drought. My purpose in discussing them here is to highlight how they attempted to implicate human agency, and therefore understandings of moral and political responsibility, when explaining these environmental goods and ills. For example, rain’s lack or abundance could be attributed to God’s will and judgment for those who rely upon it. This theological relationship with nature is a central theme in Bedouin oral poetry, which often treats rain and its corresponding season, spring, as cyclical movements of a natural world that is directed by God. In these poems, a generous spring rain is an affirmation of God’s power, a gift to worthy believers as the moisture awakens the dormant roots underfoot and brings forth a green food-stock for the Bedouin’s camels to feast upon. The loss and grief that these Bedouin attribute to periods of drought is replaced by celebration and abundance once God gives them rain.<sup>10</sup>

In this supernatural understanding of the environment, humans do have a degree of agency over rainmaking or other natural phenomena through demonstrations of piety and petitionary prayers. A version of this practice continues today in the form of the

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, “The Organization of the Falaj Irrigation System in Oman,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see P. Marcel Kurpershoek, *The Story of a Desert Knight: Oral Poetry & Narratives from Central Arabia*, Vol 2. (London, UK: Brill, 1995), 30. Contemporary critics of modernization in the Gulf look with nostalgia upon this emotional connection to the harsh and rewarding aspects of a communal life directly dependent on nature. For example, see the novel, Abdulrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, (London, UK: Vintage International, 1989).

*salat al-istisqa'*, a communal prayer wherein the devout ask God for rain. Likely an Islamic adaptation of a pagan practice that pre-dates the religion, this prayer is still conducted today in various communities in the Middle East, including in Oman.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, some scholars speculate that Bedouin rain poems were not just used as entertainment on the theme, but were also recited as a way to ask God for a rain blessing.<sup>12</sup> Such supernatural causal stories underscore a specific arena of human agency in the face of environmental goods and harms. On a material level, Omanis were at the mercy of God. However, an individual or community could garner divine favor through prayer, sacrifices, or general pious living, getting help in their worldly affairs.<sup>13</sup> Inversely, they could also derive punishment through sinful behavior.

This interplay between natural and supernatural explanations for environmental phenomena is illustrated by an Omani chronicle of political history written in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the chronicle provides accounts of disasters with no cosmic significance. For example, it documents the drowning of an upright Imam and

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<sup>11</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the prayer has been made into a national event led by the King, with newspapers calling upon citizens to participate. A Christian version of this practice also occurs in the United States, and has similarly been appropriated by public figures. The most famous instance of this may have been in 2011, when then-Texas Governor Rick Perry asked Texans to pray for rain, as the state was experiencing a long-running drought and wildfires. On Oman, see “Prayers for Rain,” *Muscat Daily*, January 1, 2017, <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Prayers-for-rain-4wpg>. On Saudi Arabia, see Tamara Pucic, “Saudi King calls on Muslims to pray for rain to ease drought,” *Arabian Business*, November 12, 2014, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-king-calls-on-muslims-pray-for-rain-ease-drought-571542.html#.V0GNa5F97b0>. On Texas, see Kate Galbraith, “Governor Declares Days of Prayer for Rain,” *The Texas Tribune*, April 21, 2011, <https://www.texastribune.org/2011/04/21/texas-governor-declares-weekend-of-prayer-for-rain/>.

<sup>12</sup> Kurpershoek, *The Story of a Desert Knight*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding sacrifice, one prominent Omani essayist and blogger has described practices she had witnessed in her community as “pre-Islamic” and “pagan” traditions, where people sacrifice animals to convince the sea—which is talked about as a man—to be calm and safe for fishing, or to convince a spring to bring forth water, or a *jinn* (spirit) to not harm the camel herds. See “Sacrifice to the Sea,” *Dhofari Gucci* (blog), <http://dhofarigucci.blogspot.com/2010/03/sacrifice-to-sea.html>.



seventy of his followers when they tried to cross a torrent during a flash-flood in order to free some of the Imam's prisoners who were threatened by the rising water. The flooding and deaths are treated as merely the encounter between people and rushing water.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, in two other passages it discusses drought as a sign of divine judgement upon the community affected:

During Hamed's administration there was a severe drought in Oman... Most of the date-trees died, and the greater portion of the inhabitants fled to el-Batinah and [Muscat], and the price of a buck of water at el-Matrah rose to ten *fals*, the owners of the wells there refusing to sell it for less. When Hamed heard of this he went forth with the people to pray for rain... While he and the people were so engaged, a cloud appeared in the heavens, followed by lightning and thunder; then the clouds covered the sky, and the rain descended, as if poured from buckets... Great fertility throughout Oman followed, and its inhabitants returned thither; the crops became abundant and prices were low.<sup>15</sup>

Later, the chronicle praises another Omani ruler (A.D. 1793), citing as evidence of his achievements that there was so much rain that there were floods, "no drought occurred in [Oman] during the whole term of his administration; on the contrary, its produce increased to a surprising extent... At [Muscat], in that year, the water nearly drowned the people who resided on the level ground..."<sup>16</sup>

This ambiguity over how much people could impact God's will, and by extension shape the weather, made room for the politicization of ecological events. People could frame storms and droughts in ways that attribute moral or political responsibility for their

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<sup>14</sup> G.P. Badger, *History of the Imams and Seyyids of 'Uman, by Salil-ibn-Razik, from 661-1856* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1871), 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

impact.<sup>17</sup> Hoffman points out how Nur al-Din al-Salimi, who led the successful 1913 Imamate rebellion against the Sultan in Muscat, engaged in such framing in his historical, theological writings, in which he seeks to justify Islamic rule in Oman. Hoffman summarizes his political, theological framing of ecological phenomena thusly:

Nur al-Din al-Salimi's *Tufat al-a'yan fi sirat ahl U'man*, a chronicle of the [early] Omani Imamate, reads in a fashion similar to the book of II Kings in the Hebrew Bible: under good Imams prices are low, rain is abundant, crops flourish and people are happy; under bad Imams prices rise, drought prevails and people die of starvation.<sup>18</sup>

The same chronicle includes a notable example of a Sultan's fleet and clove crop that was destroyed by "strong winds" (*rih shadida*) on the sea that were sent by God, in favor of the Imam.<sup>19</sup>

While these sources demonstrate a tendency to moralize or politicize instances of extreme ecological hardship, there is no record of similar attempts to address the provision of relief and rebuilding efforts, and who was responsible for them. Part of the reason for this absence might be that the record keepers of this time period tended to be the British-Omani government, and such concerns were constrained to fields of social relations that occurred largely out of their view. For example, in the 1970s, many Omani

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<sup>17</sup> Scholars of disasters under colonial rule in South Asia and East Africa during the early twentieth century have similarly noted the capacity for locals to appeal to supernatural forces to moralize and politicize the events. However, Omani history does appear to share their tendency toward millenarianism, wherein disasters are seen as signs from the heavens that encouraged anti-colonial mobilization, perhaps because the colonial presences in Oman were relatively less visible and intrusive. See Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 138-164.

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Hoffman, "The Articulation of Ibadi Identity in Modern Oman and Zanzibar," *Muslim World*, 14, no. 2 (2004): 205. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Nur al-Din al-Salimi, *Tufat al-a'yan fi sirat ahl U'man*, 2 vols. Cairo: Al-Matba'a 'l-Salafiyya, 1928-1929, 300. I am thankful to Valerie Hoffman for pointing out this passage to me.

villages withered and died in the face of drought, and yet sought no assistance from the state. Anthropological studies of Omani villages in the late 1970s illustrate an apparent absence of any attempt to hold the state accountable for providing relief in the face of drought.<sup>20</sup> The study found that several rural communities were disappearing as people abandoned their homes, land, and now-dry aqueducts. Their villages had not yet been touched by development programs underway elsewhere in the country. These ecological hardships received no attention from the national government. Neither were the drought-stricken communities themselves appealing to the state for help. It was understood in that context that the upkeep of the local aqueducts (*aflaj*), the sole source of water for many villages, was the prerogative of the local tribal elite. But these authorities were absent due to the allure of the new oil wealth which drew them to the capital city in the early 1970s. In their eyes, the water infrastructure of their village became a pointless investment, as the unstable profits of subsistence living became frivolous in comparison to the large and steady government salaries on offer in Muscat. Without reliable irrigation, the lower-class members of the tribes who worked the lands were forced to abandon their homes, often moving to larger population centers in search of work themselves. Later, the government would eventually build water infrastructure in the rural communities that remained, as part of larger development projects happening

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<sup>20</sup> I do not suggest that the findings of these studies are clear evidence for an absence of grievances and contention. It is possible that the apparent silences can be explained by other factors, such as an unwillingness of villagers to share their grievances with the researcher. Without knowing more about the methods behind the research, it is impossible to judge with certainty. However, the studies' findings do cohere with those of other sources, discussed below. J.S. Birks, "The Reaction of Rural Populations to Drought: A Case Study from South East Arabia," *Erdkunde*, 31, no. 4 (1997): 299-305; and J.S. Birks and S.E. Letts, "Qiqal and Muqayda: Dying Oases in Arabia," *Tijdschrift voor Econ. En Soc. Geografie*, 68, no. 3 (1977): 145-151.

nationwide. But tellingly, these projects were not undertaken in response to political mobilization by those Omani farmers suffering from drought. Instead, they were efforts to slow down the rapid urbanization of Muscat.

### **Imperial Perspectives**

British imperial Agents and their local informants provided ample documentation of public life from the perspective of the Omani state from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. These records corroborate the theory that Omanis did not concern themselves with what are the state's responsibilities in the face of ecological disaster. The British had been using the Omani coast as an imperial rest-stop for their India-centered empire, stationing imperial offices in Muscat first in 1800, and establishing in 1840 a Political Agency responsible for recording public matters relevant to the crown, focusing especially on sources of contention and political instability. Though "Muscat" was independent on paper, practically speaking its foreign and internal affairs were subject to British control through the Sultan. By the late nineteenth-century, the Sultan was completely dependent on British support.<sup>21</sup>

The archives show that the British paid close attention to both disasters and contention in nineteenth and twentieth century Oman, but there is scant overlap between these two topics.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, cyclones were not studied by the British as potential sources

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<sup>21</sup> Sultan Taimur bin Faisal largely abdicated his rule to the British officers Bertram Thomas from 1913-1932. See Francis Owtram, "A Close Relationship: Britain and Oman since 1750," *Qatar Digital Library*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.qdl.qa/en/close-relationship-britain-and-oman-1750>.

<sup>22</sup> These documents have been collected in R. W. Bailey (ed.), *Records of Oman 1867-1947*, Buckinghamshire, England: Archive Editions, Volumes I-XI. Others have been recently digitized and

of political or social grievances, as were kinship networks, land claims, and tribal alliances, for example. Instead, cyclones were natural phenomena posing challenges to other imperial interests. Discussed in more detail below, the earliest colonial documents represent cyclones as hazards for trading vessels in the Indian Ocean. The term “cyclone” itself was coined in 1848 by British meteorologist Henry Piddington to connote the uniquely circular wind patterns of extremely powerful storms in the Indian Ocean. British traders working with colonial officers collected and compared data to understand the pathways of cyclones. Discerning “the law of storms,” they made handbooks by the same name for sailors that contained cyclone-shaped transparencies that could be placed over a map to find safe shipping routes to the colonies of the subcontinent.<sup>23</sup>

Later, British concern for cyclones was incorporated into their economic and agricultural planning. After several famines in the 1870s, British officers in India would begin tracking the rainfall of cyclones, as it was seen as important for understanding India’s capacity for agricultural production.<sup>24</sup> In 1945, the British Colonial Office would establish the Anti-Locust Research Centre, which sought to study and control locust outbreaks in Africa and the Middle East. Seeing rainfall patterns as relevant to their

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made available in the Qatar Digital Library, available online at [https://www.qdl.qa/en/search/site/?f%255B0%255D=document\\_source%3Aarchive\\_source](https://www.qdl.qa/en/search/site/?f%255B0%255D=document_source%3Aarchive_source).

<sup>23</sup> Caroline Blyth, “Henry Piddington (1797-1858),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004). For Piddington’s connections to other Colonial studies of Atlantic “hurricanes,” see Dick DeAngelis, “Early Tropical Cyclone Chroniclers,” *Environmental Data Service*, 55, (July 1977): 16-19.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Henry F. Blanford and John Eliot, *Indian Meteorological Memoirs: Occasional Discussions and Compilations of Meteorological Data Relating to India and the Neighboring Countries*. (Calcutta, India: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing) Government of India, 1903), Vol XVI, Part I, <https://archive.org/details/dli.granth.108630/page/n3/mode/2up>.

concerns, they too would begin to establish studies of cyclones that impacted the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>25</sup> These numerous documents demonstrate a meteorological perspective of British traders and officers on cyclones. Their goal was to understand the storms' mechanics so as to further British commercial interests in the colonies.

The lack of any mention of disaster-caused grievances within these accounts of cyclones is a good indication that these kinds of events did not generate contentious politics to which state authorities had to respond. Since their arrival in 1840, the British Political Agents of Oman were tasked with documenting, among other things, any real or potential flash-points of contention in the region that might threaten the Sultan, and therefore, British interests. It was prudent to do so in an environment of shifting tribal alliances and their propensity to launch attacks against the coastal Sultan, who occasionally struggled to hold power over Muscat, let alone the territory beyond the city.<sup>26</sup> Often relying on local informants, the Agents filled volumes with accounts of local grievances, demands, tribal vendettas, attacks, shifting alliances, and compromises among tribes, the Imam of the interior, and the Sultan of the coast. That none of the British commentary on major storms is accompanied by any mention of aggrieved parties, complaints, or threats to the Sultan is evidence that Omanis themselves were not publicly mobilizing behind any disaster-related grievances.<sup>27</sup> Had they done so, the

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see D.E. Pedgley, "Cyclones Along the Arabian Coast," *Weather*, 24, no. 11 (1969): 456-470.

<sup>26</sup> On the political tumult of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see J.E. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging State*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> To be clear, I am not claiming that there were no grievances circulating out of view from the British. But if they were there, they were not accompanied by significant enough mobilization that the British would deem them worthy of record. On the distinction between public and "hidden" grievances, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

British would have likely documented it, as they did regarding territorial disputes, economic grievances, and protests over British influence on the region, among many other issue of local dispute.<sup>28</sup>

The imperial view of disasters in Oman is illustrated in the British volumes that describe massive storms affecting the Omani coast and interior in 1890, 1898, 1912, and 1917. The storm of 1890 appears to have been the most destructive, and received the longest commentary relative to the subsequent storms. A look at how the Political Agent describes the storm demonstrates the extent of the Agent's concern. He dedicates a significant portion of the report to the meteorological details, including the wind behavior and the precipitation rate: "11 inches and 24 cents" of rain over a 24-hour period. He then goes on to describe the impact on the local community and economy:

The Sultan computes the number of deaths due directly to the effects of this storm to be about 727, but I am inclined to be of opinion that it is under the mark, as there are several places from which no report has yet been received. The damage done to the property which in Oman consists principally of date trees, is considered enormous, as several thousands of trees are reported to have been uprooted and carried away by the floods. The back of the eastern portion of the town became dangerously flooded. The low-lying ground between the small gate and the Sadab Pass being converted into a lake.<sup>29</sup>

The agent later wrote a financial report of the destruction: \$871,875 in agriculture, on account of how long it would take to replace the date palm trees and return to normal production rates, and a loss of \$25,000 in Omani boats, noting that the larger, more

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<sup>28</sup> For example, the Imam's judge (*qadi*) wrote to the PAM objection to the British "permitting the forbidden, such as the sale of wine and tobacco, and forbidding the permitted, such as the trade in arms and slaves." See Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> 'File XXVIII/1 Internal Politics & Relations with Oman. Narrative of Muscat Affairs 1872-1893' [147v] (294/316), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/6/36, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100044275644.0x00005f](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100044275644.0x00005f)>

expensive ships that were destroyed were owned by foreign traders.<sup>30</sup> The only mention of local responses to the storm, other than the Sultan's casualty report, is of an effort to drain the flooded areas. A report written a year later mentions that many of the houses were "still in ruins," though made no mention as to why. Nor does the document note that the poor conditions of those living in the ruins would be a source of instability that threaten British interests, a common position taken by later imperial Agents commenting upon the squalor of Omani life in the 1950s and 1960s. The apparent lack of rebuilding had no broader significance, as the British were concerned.<sup>31</sup>

It is unlikely that the absence of records regarding any contention around the disaster is due to a lack of concern or attention on behalf of the British. The same document that noted the lack of rebuilding, but gave no mention of any corresponding grievances, also provided several pages of accounts of *other* local grievances. These disputes included the recurring inter-tribal conflicts and "contending factions" which were conducting border raids against one another; a tribal "Chief" who complained of "the tone of letters addressed to him" in regards to an attempt of extradition within his territory; the need to placate the Bedouin tribes that were raiding trade caravans; and multiple inner-tribal conflicts over succession.

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<sup>30</sup> The Agent was so disturbed of the storm's power that he searched through local records for similar events, noting that he found mention of one in the Islamic year of 251 A.H. [865 A.D.]. File XXVIII/1 Internal Politics & Relations with Oman. Narrative of Muscat Affairs 1872-1893' [148r] (295/316), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/6/36, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100044275644.0x000060](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100044275644.0x000060)> [accessed 7 July 2020].

<sup>31</sup> 'Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muscat Political Agency for 1890-91' [116r] (7/54), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/V/23/60, no. 285, in *Qatar Digital Library*, [https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023549721.0x000009](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023549721.0x000009). [accessed 7 July 2020].



Later disasters in the British record of Oman appear with even less detail, especially regarding the local response. There is a one-sentence report of a disastrous cyclone on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1898, simply stating that it destroyed homes in Muscat and date palm orchards in surrounding areas.<sup>32</sup> A storm in 1912 received two-sentences of mention: it destroyed 30 boats, and killed a man.<sup>33</sup> A larger cyclone was reported to have devastated the coastal city of Sur in 1917, destroying a great deal of the agricultural infrastructure by uprooting 1,200 date palm trees, and wrecking people's homes.<sup>34</sup> The only recorded response to that storm concerns two Omanis who rescued a crew of seven sailors aboard a stranded refrigerator barge, and a band of Bedouins that looted the weapons and other materials on board before the British could retrieve them.<sup>35</sup> As with the previous documents, these records show a close attention to the political affairs and concerns of Omanis. For example, the 1917 records give detailed accounts of the ongoing Muscat Rebellion (1913-1920) in the interior, Omanis' apparent contempt for the Sultan in both the interior and coastal regions, and concerns with the financial corruption of one of the

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<sup>32</sup> 'Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf. Vol I. Historical. Part II. J G Lorimer. 1915' [2210] (727/1262), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023514763.0x00007d](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023514763.0x00007d)> [accessed 7 July 2020]; and Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1883/84 - 1904/05 [211r] (426/602), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/709, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023373227.0x00001b](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023373227.0x00001b)> [accessed 7 July 2020].

<sup>33</sup> File 4/4 Muscat Administration Reports and related correspondence' [13r] (25/712), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/6/337, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100059396987.0x00001a](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100059396987.0x00001a)> [accessed 7 July 2020].

<sup>34</sup> File 2297/1919 'Persian Gulf Residency Monthly Reports. 1912-20.' [137v] (279/1044), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/10/827, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100063236932.0x000050](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100063236932.0x000050)> [accessed 7 July 2020].

<sup>35</sup> File 4/4 Muscat Administration Reports and related correspondence' [150r] (299/712), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/6/337, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100059396988.0x000064](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100059396988.0x000064)> [accessed 7 July 2020].

Sultan's underlings.<sup>36</sup> But the British Agents do not appear to see the destruction of the coastal city of Sur, or any potential response to it, as relevant to their concerns with the Sultan's popularity in this region. The British do not note any overlap between Omani politics and the suffering and destruction caused by these cyclones.

This apparent irrelevance of disasters to political contestation is perhaps corroborated by Dawn Chatty's anthropological work on public health development projects in 1980s Oman. She documented some of the notions of political membership that development practitioners encountered in rural areas that had not yet been touched by Sultan Qaboos's new regime. For example, in 1980, she accompanied a team of doctors who traveled across the desert interior of Oman, which is sparingly inhabited by nomadic herders that move between Oman and the United Arab Emirates. On that trip they came across a group from the Harasiis tribe that was getting ready for a wedding. The doctors asked if they could vaccinate the children, and the parents were confused. Chatty recorded the dialogue in her field notes:

We said, "The Sultan of Oman wishes to see all Omanis immunized against these diseases."

"Why would he want to do this for us?" they persisted.

We were initially at a loss for an answer. We had assumed that the sense of belonging to one nation and of the obligations of leadership had reached this part of the country. It had not.<sup>37</sup>

Chatty would go on to study this tribe over the next fourteen years, especially the government's attempts to offer development programs, and the Sultan's efforts to make

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 289-295.

<sup>37</sup> Excerpt from Dawn Chatty, *Field Notebook 1*, May 1980; as cited in Dawn Chatty, "Rituals of Royalty and the Elaboration of Ceremony in Oman: View from the Edge," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41 (2009): 39.

his rule synonymous with what she calls a modern state.<sup>38</sup> She found that during this period, the Harasiis tribe went from having no clear expectations from the Omani state, as illustrated above, to expecting that the Sultan would take care of their needs. Indeed, when they would later become convinced that the Sultan was unable to live up to this role, many of them moved their homes over the border to the United Arab Emirates, refusing calls from the Omani government to return.<sup>39</sup> This change in the way that the Harasiis understood their citizenship, their membership within the Omani community and what they were entitled to accordingly, nicely illustrates the “before and after” of the new ideas and practices of citizenship associated with Qaboos’ regime.

Considered together, these sources provide a patchy yet coherent image that is in contrast to what would come later. Omanis living before the influence of Sultan Qaboos’ development programs, or in the case of Chatty’s observations, outside of them, had a variety of different ways of understanding their environment, providing causal explanations that appealed to both natural and supernatural forces. When it came to ecological calamities, these events appear to have been placed within moral and political frameworks. When weather phenomena led to collective suffering or prosperity, there was some mix of human agency and divine judgment behind it. But these sources do not comment upon the responsibilities of the state to its subjects in regards to responding to these hardships. Moreover, the British and their local informants who monitored and recorded political and social grievances in the area saw disasters as irrelevant to the

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<sup>38</sup> Sultan Qaboos also used such terms in his public speeches. See Joseph A. Kéchichian, “A Vision of Oman: State of the Sultanate Speeches by Qaboos bin Said, 1970-2006,” *Middle East Policy*, 15 no. 4, (2008): 112-133.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

maintenance of power in the region.<sup>40</sup> To them, cyclones were natural hazards that interfered with trade routes, and variables that affected their agricultural planning. This pattern of record suggests that Omanis made little trouble for the Sultan, and therefore the British, when disasters struck. There are no records of public contestations of rule surrounding issues like aid provision or rebuilding.

The confused Harasiis parents, the ruins of Omani ghost villages that could have easily been saved by state development programs already underway in other parts of the country, the silence of the British archive on any protests or grievances toward the Sultan following a disaster despite the other grievances being recorded—these are indicators of an absence of a discourse of citizenship that would make environmental hardship something for the state to address. Taken together, they suggest that the state in Oman was not understood as being responsible for attending to people's needs in the face of forces outside of their control, such as storms, drought, or disease. A skeptical reader could argue that there may have been quiet or deliberately hidden grumblings among the Omanis regarding the state's shortcomings after disasters, left unrecorded by both Omanis and the British. But such a reader would have to explain why these grievances were never made public in a context where the power of the Sultan over Omanis was so minimal, and contention and even open rebellion was so common among the Omani tribes.<sup>41</sup> The Sultan's subjects were not shy in their discontent. That they did not use

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<sup>40</sup> On the use of native agents in the Persian Gulf during this period, see James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> On the correlation between the extent of state control and surveillance on one hand, and the existence of a "hidden transcript" of grievances and resistance on the other, see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 89-90.

disasters as occasions to protest or mobilize is a clear indication that disaster relief was not understood as being the responsibility of the Omani state. As the next section shows, that would begin to change at the behest of colonial and anti-colonial forces.

### **Imperialism and the Origins of a New Omani Citizenship**

Conceiving of government responsibility vis-à-vis natural disasters became a feature of Omani political culture via the state-building efforts of British imperialism. This is not to argue that the Omani state and broader political culture were simply reiterations of those found in Europe. Rather, the rationalities and strategies of rule deployed by Omani Sultans were substantially shaped by British Colonial officers and the challenges they faced, such as anti-colonial rebellions. For this, the officers drew from their own European understandings of how to rule, and what kinds of protection and welfare government can offer its citizens. This development is central to my analysis of contemporary politics in Oman because the legacy of these colonial strategies is that they shaped the contemporary social contract. They made such protection and welfare prominent within Omani discourse as one of several ways for framing political membership, and what states are responsible for providing their citizens.

While my goal is not to make an intervention into the frameworks used by scholars to study Omani politics, it bears mentioning here that the political significance of this new social contract is often overlooked in the literature.<sup>42</sup> The most prominent accounts of Omani politics have emphasized its otherness to “Western,” industrialized

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<sup>42</sup> Exceptions include Valeri, *Oman*; and M.H. Ilias, “Neoliberalism and the New Means of Art of Government in the Persian Gulf Monarchies,” *International Politics*, 3 (2010): 31-52.

politics. Peterson classifies the Omani state as “neo-patriarchal,” that is, a modern-gloss on the pre-modern feudal systems of patronage and the expectations and power-relations therein.<sup>43</sup> Takriti emphasizes the nature of the Sultan’s sovereignty, calling it a Hobbesian, absolutist monarchy.<sup>44</sup> Valeri and most others emphasize its characteristics as a “rentier state” on account of how its hydrocarbon wealth has shaped its state institutions and what citizens expect of them.<sup>45</sup> While these labels help us notice patterns that may be in some ways peculiar to Omani politics, they also obscure consequential patterns that are common to other states. My attention to the changing ideas and practices of citizenship helps us understand why Omani politics, for all their uniqueness, are nevertheless structured by familiar frameworks of membership and state responsibility found elsewhere. This approach helps us see why disaster politics in Oman follow a similar historical pattern to those in the US, making new political opportunities possible in both countries.

The changes to conceptions of political membership and state responsibility emerged out of a strategy of rule in Oman imposed by British imperial officers. Readers of some of the scholarship concerning British imperialism in other parts of the world will find this argument familiar. For example, David Scott’s analysis of British colonial practices in India documents the emergence of “colonial governmentality” as a new way of thinking among British colonizers. In Scott’s account, between 1796 and 1832, colonial officers had been concerned with maintaining “sovereignty” over a territory, as

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<sup>43</sup> J.E. Peterson, “The Emergence of Post-Traditional Oman,” *Durham Middle East Papers*, no. 78, (2004).

<sup>44</sup> Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup> Valeri, *Oman*.

part of a larger mercantilist framework of resource extraction. This approach consisted of establishing a defensive position on the territory, and enforcing laws with the ultimate goal of extracting wealth from the colony. The primary concern of this *colonial sovereignty* was making sure that subjects obeyed their commands. Hence, the habits and religious proclivities of the colonial “society” or “population” was of little concern to the colonizer at this time.

This approach to colonial rule in India was eventually subsumed in the mid-nineteenth century by what Scott calls *colonial governmentality*, as British officers complained that their current strategies were hindering the development of commerce and the improvement of the moral character of their colonized subjects. The new approach to rule was much more intrusive, concerned with transforming the population itself, “disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions, and with constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable... new forms of life to come into being.”<sup>46</sup> In Sri Lanka, it meant creating a new kind of citizenry, a liberal colonial society, providing an education and a free press so that the population might rid itself of “ignorant prejudices,” like religious traditions, which have “obstruct[ed] the improvement of the country.” Officers believed that such “moral and intellectual improvement,” combined with a free press, would allow this now-improved popular opinion to promote “good government,” and habits of free market commerce.

British colonizers in Oman would not go so far as to try and promote a *liberal* society as their predecessors did in Sri Lanka. But as I argue below, a similar shift

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<sup>46</sup> David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” *Social Text*, 43 (Autumn, 1995): 193.

toward colonial governmentality by the British in Oman occurred in the mid-twentieth century, precipitating the emergence of a new discourse of citizenship in Oman. This shift was consequential for explaining how disasters would later become trials for the Omani government.

### **From Colonial Sovereignty to Colonial Governmentality in Oman**

In the early twentieth century, the British were primarily concerned with maintaining colonial sovereignty in the territory of modern-day Oman. The area had been split into multiple polities, including the coastline, “Muscat,” ruled by a British-backed Sultan, and an interior, “Oman,” ruled by a confederation of tribes, headed by an elected Imam. Sovereignty over any given area or community was diffused, commanded through oaths of loyalty from tribal leaders, and all the variance that attends personalized rule. For example, a British surgeon visiting Masirah Island in 1939 described the local ruler as a Sheikh who spent only one month a year on the island; he was hated by the inhabitants as an outsider, and split his allegiance between the Imam of the interior and the Sultan of the coastline, depending on the circumstances.<sup>47</sup> The historian Takriti summarizes the scene well: “The most [the Sultan] could achiev[e] was control over some major towns and forts and the successful accumulation of customs from coastal trade.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Visit by H.M.S. *Challenger*, 1939,” in *Records of Oman 1867-1947*. (Farnham Common, Buckinghamshire, England: Archive Editions), 1988.

<sup>48</sup> Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 12.



Responding to this complicated picture, British Imperial officers argued that it was best to leave these “Arabs” to their own devices as much as possible. For example, a handbook created to prepare British officers for deliberations in the post-World War I peace conference detailed the make-up of “Arabia.” Its entry on current-day Omani territory describes “primitive people, incapable of economic development,” and a desolate and harsh geography that makes it impossible for any foreign or local rulers to conquer.<sup>49</sup> In short, Omanis were viewed by the colonizers as part of a larger ungovernable landscape. This anarchic character did not present a major problem to British interests, however, as they were only concerned with maintaining access to ports on this part of Arabian Peninsula for assisting its shipping routes to India, where, as described above, they were much more involved in governing their colonial subjects. Thus, in Oman, the British restricted themselves to the practices of colonial sovereignty, investing money, military intervention, and diplomatic efforts to prop-up the coastal Sultan of Muscat as a British ally.

The extent of what could be called government administration during this period was limited to a handful of advisors to the Sultan, usually his family members and British officers. Noteworthy here is that this administration did not seem to be focused on governing the lives of Omanis. Rather, it was concerned with exercising sovereignty, the enforcing of the Sultan’s will as law, and the extraction of taxes on traded items.<sup>50</sup> In the

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<sup>49</sup> G.W. Prothero (ed.), *Arabia*, (London, UK: H.M. Stationery Office, 1920), 41.

<sup>50</sup> For example, the major administrative adjustments under Sultan Said bin Taimur (1932-1970) were not done in pursuit of new public policy goals. Rather, he made these adjustments to try and give himself more autonomy from British advisors, for example, by establishing a council of administrators that would be subordinate to him. J.E. Peterson, *Oman’s Insurgencies*, 78.

eyes of the British, this minimalist version of a state was enough. There was no need to get further involved in the lives of “Arabs,” especially of those in the interior region, “Oman,” ruled by the Imam. The exceptions that prove the rule are when the interior tribes would attack the British-backed Sultan of the coast. In these instances, the British would intervene, but only to establish treaties that would keep the peace with the interior tribes, thus protecting their access to the coastline.

This minimal intervention into the lives of Omanis would change in the mid-twentieth century. Robust development projects slowly came to be seen as a key tool of British interests throughout the British Empire, when Britain came under growing international and domestic criticism for its imperialism. Beginning in the inter-war period and escalating thereafter, such global domination was becoming harder to justify through the values of trusteeship and the so-called civilizing process, as conquered peoples suffered from economic stagnation and social unrest, and organized rebellions emerged against the British and their local allies.

This pressure resulted in the passing of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act in Britain in 1940. As Constantine puts it, the Act had the, “explicit purpose of improving social conditions in the colonies... as a method of removing legitimate grievances in the colonies, reestablishing the empire and defusing criticism of British colonial rule.”<sup>51</sup> Among these British imperial reformists, the developmental goals of the 1940 act were seen as potential solutions to the multiple problems facing Britain after WWII. Investing in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure in their territories abroad

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy 1914-1940*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 259.

might simultaneously increase the productivity of British colonies and temper the radicalism of anti-colonial movements for the time being.

But such development efforts could not ensure the sustainability of empire in the eyes of British authorities. Just years after the Act was passed, the ruling party was convinced that decolonization was inevitable.<sup>52</sup> The aftermath of World War II only cemented this conclusion: maintaining an empire in this post-war context appeared increasingly difficult, as the British government was financially bankrupt and facing food-shortages at home. There was also increasing international pressure from the newly formed United Nations to replace empire with independent nation-states. Moreover, the British had failed to achieve quick, decisive victory over anti-colonial movements in places like Kenya, Malaya, India, and Burma.

By the 1950s, the inevitable independence of the remaining British colonies appeared close at hand. Thus a group of reformists among the British officers concluded that it was in Britain's interests to ensure that they left in their wake a stable political infrastructure and allies to oversee it.<sup>53</sup> In regards to the Middle Eastern areas of British control, imperial politicians like Foreign Secretary Bevin (1945-1951) feared both an Islamic war against Britain, as well as communist infiltration in "backward" societies.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization, 1918-1968*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Furedi, "Creating a Breathing Space," 102-104. A similar shift occurred in the French Empire, beginning in 1946. See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 420.

<sup>54</sup> Reflecting the domestic debates within Britain, this Cold War calculation was used to advocate for sustaining the British presence in key areas, especially the Persian Gulf. A 1965 cable for the British Cabinet Defense and Oversea Policy Committee warned, "We could be certain that both the United Arab Republic [the union of Syria and Egypt from 1958-1971] and the Soviet Union would be fishing in these troubled waters [of the Persian Gulf]. Iran's confidence would be so shaken [by a British withdraw] that

The idea was that radicals, especially Marxists, had to be isolated and the moderates empowered before the British withdrew.

The logic of colonial governmentality would be repurposed for these aims. In many parts of the empire, while the British fought insurgencies, they also invested in development projects and allowed some forms of moderate self-governance, and more importantly, improved the living conditions of the “backwards” populations. As Hyam puts it, “[Foreign Secretary Bevin] wanted joint co-operation, a partnership on a common basis, a mutual interest in ‘a great design’ for security and prosperity, fighting communism by raising living standards for the common people and *fellahin* [peasants] through the whole core-area from Turkey to Pakistan.”<sup>55</sup>

While this reformist movement within the British ranks made improving the population a strategy for Britain’s post-imperial interests, Oman remained a hold-out for conservative British officers who clung to the old model of colonial sovereignty.<sup>56</sup> For example, in the mid-1950s, Sir Bernard Burrows, the conservative British political

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we would have to reckon on her abandoning her pro-Western alignment. There might also be consequences for the supply of oil, the profitability of the British oil investment and the strength of sterling.” CAB 148/23, OPD (65)174, “Some considerations of foreign policy with particular reflections on the Middle East”: memorandum by Mr. Stewart for Cabinet Defense and Oversea Policy Committee, 22 November, 1965, in *East of Suez and the Commonwealth, 1964-1971*, S. R. Ashton and Wm Roger Louis (eds.), Series A, Volume 5, (London, UK: The Stationary Office, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Although Britain more often failed to leave behind strong allies in most of their former empire, Oman and other Gulf monarchs were exceptions to the trend.

<sup>56</sup> The British wished to maintain influence in Oman because they valued Oman’s geostrategic location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, which made it essential for controlling shipping routes through this major trade artery. Additionally, Oman’s southern coastline and the island of Masirah were important for British trade routes and communication in the Indian Ocean. Perhaps most importantly, British oil prospectors eventually came to believe that the interior of Oman had substantial oil wealth (later confirmed in 1963). Ensuring access to these fields was seen as synonymous with propping up the Sultan Said bin Taimur after he conquered the interior region, abolishing the Imamate in 1955. This put the land and the hoped-for oil beneath it under his jurisdiction.

resident in the Gulf explained that, “There is quite a lot to be said for a reasonably efficient feudalism.”<sup>57</sup> Rejecting the utility of colonial governmentality, he harkened to the Orientalist perspective of the interwar period, seeing Oman and Omanis as ungovernable and incapable of progress. In his eyes, keeping local order required that Omanis fear the British enough to obey the laws and pay customs; the British need not bother improving the lives of Omanis themselves. In contrast, Burrows’ later replacement lamented the backwardness of Omani life, and identified it as a threat to British interests:

The condition of the people is miserable, the Sultan is unpopular, there is no central administration... and, under the present regime, not a great deal of hope for the future... What surprises me, is not that there is still a rebellion but that there are not half a dozen similar uprisings in other parts of the country.<sup>58</sup>

It is worth dwelling on the ideas expressed in this complaint, as they clearly articulate the policy goals that would eventually shape the repertoire of citizenship that would emerge in Oman. In his eyes, what Oman *has* is a government lacking in administration and therefore lacking in legitimacy. This absence is a threat to British interests because Omanis are understandably taking up arms in hopes of a better future without the negligent Sultan. What Oman *needs*, it follows, is a capable and willing central administration to make the population happy and hopeful. Note that he is not just calling for governmentalizing the state, i.e. more administration, but for advertising a new social contract. Political stability would come not just from improving people’s *material*

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<sup>57</sup> W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 86.

<sup>58</sup> As quoted in Mark Curtis, *Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses*, (London, UK: Vintage, 2004), 302-304.

*conditions*, but by using the public goods that such rule would generate as a way to *re-frame the state's legitimacy*, feeding images of progress to the imaginations of the population, and making that progress synonymous with the Sultan's rule.

This officer's misgivings about the squalor of Omani civilians was not shared by his immediate superior, and the reformist move toward development would be continually frustrated for another fifteen years until the coup of 1970. Those imperial officers who were convinced that "development" was the best way to secure British interests were eventually galvanized to overthrow Sultan Said bin Taimur by what appeared to be a pattern of rebellion in Oman. The rebellion against the Sultan in the interior, (Jebel Akhdar War, 1954-1959), and the anti-colonial Dhofar War (1963-1976) were both understood by the British as expressions of Omani frustration with their poverty and the harsh rule of the Sultan Said bin Taimur. Underscoring this need for development, other tribal leaders were *allying* with the Sultan in hopes that he could deliver the same fruits of modernity on display in those neighboring countries who had already tapped their oil reserves, like Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>59</sup> That is, the pressure to modernize was coming from both the Sultan's enemies and his allies.

The international context was also changing, lending credence to the notion that colonial governmentality was a better strategy for British interests. Arab nationalist movements in the region had been overthrowing British proxy rulers and expelling colonial troops in Iraq (1958), Egypt (1952 and 1956), and South Yemen (1967), and were receiving financial and military aid from the USSR and China. As a version of this

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<sup>59</sup> John Townsend, *Oman: The Making of a Modern State*, (London, UK: Croom Helm, 1977).

nationalist-Marxist movement emerged in Oman in the mid-1960s in the southern region of Dhofar, the rebels sang of Arab independence from the British and their Omani monarch, and of a socialist vision of transforming a “traditional” Oman into a “modern” one.<sup>60</sup> Acting as the People’s Front for the Liberation of Oman, they built some of the first modern schools, agricultural projects, and medical centers in Oman.<sup>61</sup> In other words, parallel to the imperial reformist emphasis on the needs to develop Oman, there was a competing nationalist movement, also calling for transforming the country into a modern one. And this modern alternative rejected the British-supported Sultan, and was ideologically allied to their Cold War enemies, the USSR, China, and Egypt.

This bottom-up and international pressure in Oman, and the specter of spreading independence movements throughout the remaining British Empire, especially in the Middle East, thoroughly discredited the conservative approach of colonial sovereignty among a cohort of British officers in Oman. Reformists advocated for developing Oman with increasing urgency. That is, the pressure gave credence to the notion among some colonial administrators that they needed to counter the socialist vision of modernity with a monarchal one, and do so quickly.<sup>62</sup> It was here that Oman saw its first Sultan-backed programs for development, targeting the well-being and attitudes of everyday people

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<sup>60</sup> The most thorough account of this is in Takriti *Monsoon Revolution*, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Fred Halliday, *Mercenaries: ‘Counter-Insurgency’ in the Gulf*, (Nottingham, UK: Russell Press Ltd., 1977), 48. Limited by funds and counterinsurgent bombing, these public goods would be eclipsed by the Sultan Qaboos’ own development programs.

<sup>62</sup> Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 155. At the time, many observers believed that the slow modernization of India contributed to the popularity of the independence movement, instilling a lesson that quicker development is better. See Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire*.

living under the biological *ancient regime* in Oman. For example, there were efforts to build model farms, roads, health centers, and a school for the sons of elite Sheikhs.

But these development programs were insufficient to serve as propaganda for Sultan Said bin Taimur. One reason is that they were coming too slow. For example, the British Political Officer of the Persian Gulf wrote in 1965,

If the Sultan is to make his people more contented and thus reduce the danger of revolution (at present they tend to be discontented either because they are at heart supporters of the ex-Imam, or are frustrated by the Sultan's regulations, or have seen what oil-rich Rulers elsewhere have done for their people), then it is important that his Civil Development Programme be accelerated and expanded... There is a real danger that he may leave it too late.<sup>63</sup>

Another problem with the Sultan's development programs was that they reflected the favoritism of patronage, rather than a social contract that would serve all, including the poorest Omani citizens. After a British officer's tour of the Persian Gulf in 1967, he remarked upon his meeting with Sultan Said Ibn Taimur:

I am concerned about the future of the Sultanate. It is possible that this... will be the next target of revolution in the Middle East. The Sultan is set in the ways of fairly benevolent despotism... He says that he is going to set up a 'development board' to spend the oil money on improvements. But it is clear that he... will favor the loyal areas of his Sultanate at the expense of the disaffected. Nothing I could say could budge him from this visionless policy.<sup>64</sup>

Note how in the eyes of the more conservative imperialists, the Omanis were a threat to stability because they were racially anarchic, incapable of acquiescence to authority. But

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<sup>63</sup> "Muscat Annual Report for the Year 1965," published in Francis Carey Owtram, "Oman and the West: State Formation in Oman since 1920," PhD diss., University of London, 1999, 338.

<sup>64</sup> FCO 8/31, no 30: report by Mr. Roberts to Mr. Brown on his visit to the Persian Gulf and Iran, 31 Oct to 12 Nov 1967, 17 November, 1967; in *East of Suez and the Commonwealth, 1964-1971*, S R Ashton and Wm Roger Louis (eds.), Series A, Volume 5, (London, UK: The Stationary Office, 2004).



in the eyes of the above liberal imperialist, Omanis were “disaffected,” and therefore progress and stability can be achieved by improving their conditions.

In 1966, the British Political Officer at Abu Dhabi advocated for such an approach when he discussed the importance of establishing “good government” in the interior of Oman in order to convince local tribes not to sabotage the newly built oil pipeline. He expressed distress at Sultan Taimur’s austerity, who was offering only a small bribe to the tribal Sheikh for cooperation:

I have very grave doubts, amounting to certainty, as to whether he will pay them enough. Army patrols along a pipeline have been found often enough to be ineffective in such a situation and the only way in which a pipeline can be preserved from attack lies in absolute cooperation from the local people (which must be purchased), and a very high-class intelligence service... *The loyalty of the tribesmen must be purchased not so much by money as by good government and respect shown to the Sheikhs.* Substantial bribes will help. Small ones will not.<sup>65</sup>

He goes on to comment on the external and internal pressures to modernize life in Oman, and Sultan Taimur’s dangerous reluctance to heed them.

I believe that the Sultan still operates with the tribes on a basis of minute bribes backed up by convincing terror tactics in the form of the threat of imprisonment in *Jalali*. The trouble will be that with outside influence and money and a growing feeling among the people that they would like to advance with the times, the Sultan’s old-fashioned tactics are likely to become more out-of-date and ineffective as the days go by...<sup>66</sup>

These expressions of British frustration with the Sultan make it clear that colonial administrators in the region came to see “development” or “modernization” as a tool for achieving their interests in the region. Instead of leaving the lives of Omanis to a

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<sup>65</sup> E.F. Henderson, “Security – Muscat and Oman,” PRO, FO 371/185384, July 19, 1966. Published in Owtram, “Oman and the West.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

“relatively efficient feudalism,” as in the previous policy, the British would now try to improve Omanis by making them moderns. In contrast to selective favoritism, these reformers were pushing for projects that made all of the Sultan’s subjects feel taken care of, a notion of relative equality among Omanis that resembled citizenship more than it did cronyism, or “small bribes.” In short, the imperial administrators reasoned that to pacify the population and cement British interests, the Omanis needed to see the Sultan as their leader into a more prosperous and peaceful future—a British-friendly modernity.

But the Sultan disagreed. Some historians speculate that his reluctance to conform to the demands for development came from his desire to find some political autonomy from the British. He saw British power over previous Sultans as coming from their financial debts to the British. Thus, austerity measures and heavily taxing traders may have been a means to minimize the extent of British control over his matters, since it was not until 1967 that Oman began exporting oil. Other historians speculate that he saw his rule threatened by the rapid social changes that come with development. He is reported to have refused a proposal from a British reformist to build schools with the quip: “That is why you lost India, because you educated the people.”<sup>67</sup>

Whatever the reasons for Sultan Said bin Taimur’s reluctance to conform to this new vision of citizenship in Oman, the now-empowered British reformists orchestrated a

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<sup>67</sup> Quote from Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa’id bin Taymur, 1932-1970*, (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 156. On Taimur’s austerity and anti-modernism, see also James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military, and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire*, (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 62; and Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 160.

coup in 1970 to replace him with his son, Qaboos bin Said.<sup>68</sup> As I show in the next section, the development programs that followed ultimately succeeded in securing popular loyalty to the Sultan. The coup enabled a successful counter-insurgency strategy, ending the civil war. This strategy expanded into a nation-wide development program that transformed both the quality of life for Omani citizens,<sup>69</sup> and how they understood their relationship with the state.

### **Qaboos' New Social Contract and the Environment**

The details of Qaboos' rise to power and his state- and nation-building projects are complex and have been documented thoroughly by other scholars.<sup>70</sup> In this section, I focus on how new ideas and practices of citizenship became a major feature of these changes. The project of cultivating popular loyalty to the Qaboos regime made his rule synonymous with modern prosperity, and ultimately, into a way of life that was secure from the forces of nature.

As other scholars have pointed out, Qaboos was virtually unknown to Omanis when he was given the throne. Making himself known and popular included a concerted effort of propaganda. For example, Qaboos made tours around the country, held parades, and gave radio addresses; he appeared in the newly established newspapers, and

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<sup>68</sup> The British orchestration of the coup was denied publically until finally confirmed by the accidental declassification of British documents in 2005. See Mike Thomson, "Document" *BBC 4*, November 23, 2009, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ny7nb>.

<sup>69</sup> Oman has been ranked by the United Nations Development Program as having "the fastest progress in human development" since 1970. See UNDP, *Human Development Report 2010, The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development*. (New York City, NY: UNDP), 27.

<sup>70</sup> See Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*; Valeri, *Oman*; and Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*.

eventually, on Oman's first TV channel, largely created for this purpose. A royal photographer was hired to travel to rural areas and show pictures of Qaboos to people who had no access to telecommunications.<sup>71</sup> The consistent narrative presented in these advertisement campaigns made Qaboos appear as the mirror opposite of his father. While Sultan Said bin Taimur was framed as an austere, slave-owning, "anti-modern" ruler, Qaboos' brand would be modernization through massive spending on public goods.<sup>72</sup> Qaboos was not just liberating Omanis from a despot. He was also liberating them from the hardships of subsistence living under the biological *ancienne regime*, transforming the means of economic production and the introducing new technology and social services to Omani citizens.

The initial steps of advertising this new social contract occurred within the context of a counter-insurgency strategy to put down the anti-colonial rebels in the Dhofar region, who had been waging war on the previous Sultan since the mid-1960s. The British strategy was a mix of, on the one hand, tactics of punishing rebels and advertising this violence to the larger public as a threat. This included practices like hanging tortured bodies in public, filling with cement the drinking wells of villages who supported the rebels, and dropping leaflets that read: "Military planes, cannons and automatic weapons are out hunting for you. Wherever you have crept, they will teach

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<sup>71</sup> For a detailed account of how the British developed Omani media as a means of popularizing Qaboos and creating a national culture, see Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 199-233. See also, Chatty, "Rituals of Royalty and the Elaboration of Ceremony in Oman." On the royal photographer's travels, see Madiha Asif, "Our Oman: I captured Queen Elizabeth's first visit to Oman in 1979," *Times of Oman*, July 7, 2018, <https://timesofoman.com/article/137692>.

<sup>72</sup> Valeri, *Oman*.

you a lesson and in the end will kill you all.”<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, their tactics adopted a “hearts and minds” campaign that targeted both the rebels and the Omani population writ-large.<sup>74</sup> The campaign was designed to isolate and disable the socialist rebels by winning over the larger audience of Omani tribal leaders who were either aiding the rebels or watching from the sidelines of the conflict. This attempt to rally the larger Omani audience to the side of the Sultan had been a tactic in the previous British counter-insurgency in Oman during the Jebel Akhdar War (1954-1959). But in that earlier conflict, the emphasis was on advertising punishment, as political officers rationalized bombing the water aqueducts and agriculture of the villages of the rebelling interior to teach them that “resistance will be fruitless and lead only to hardship.” The aim was,

To show the population the power of weapons at our disposal and convince them that resistance will be fruitless and lead only to hardship. I am most conscious of the need to avoid casualties and to give as little opening as possible to adverse publicity. (b) Thereafter to inflict the maximum inconvenience on the population so that out of discomfort and boredom they will turn against the rebel minority.<sup>75</sup>

In the later Dhofar war, Qaboos’ regime would add the idea of a new social contract to the repertoire of their hearts and minds campaign. The counter-insurgents sought to advertise the material “development” of Omani life, and a cultivation of a new “Omani” under the Sultan, in contrast to the rebels’ “Arab,” national culture, which the

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<sup>73</sup> Quote from Halliday, *Mercenaries*, 55.

<sup>74</sup> The British officers used this phrase regularly in their documentation of the rebellion. For example, see “Military Assistance to Oman from UK,” FCO 8/1856, 1972 Jan 01-1972 Dec 31, <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fco/8/1856/n/122>.

<sup>75</sup> FO 371/126876, “Bahrain Telegram No. 769 to Foreign Office,” <https://www.agda.ae/en/catalogue/tna/fo/371/126876/n/26>.

British painted as atheistic, communist, and foreign to Omani culture.<sup>76</sup> One British counter-insurgent fighting the Arab nationalists aptly summarized this overall strategy:

...there was a conscious dynamic at work on the government side which sought to convey this consistent message: if you were with the government you would get money and security. If you were on the insurgent side, you would stay poor and get killed or captured.<sup>77</sup>

Such was the evolution of British counter-insurgent thinking in Oman, targeting the imaginations of the broader Omani population to isolate the rebels and consolidate loyalty to the new Sultan.

Crucially for the purposes of this study, the kind of security that the British counter-insurgents offered to Omanis in exchange for allegiance to the Sultan was not just of protection from human-to-human violence—often that of the British themselves. It also consisted of having access to new sources of water, income, health care, food, and roads; the latter is significant on account of the mountainous terrain which encumbered travel to land-locked areas in Oman.<sup>78</sup> In the earliest phases, British “Civil Aid Teams” entered areas recently cleared of rebel forces.<sup>79</sup> As early as 1973, British officials expressed hopes privately that the counter-insurgents’ “visible economic development”

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<sup>76</sup> However, Halliday notes that the Sultan’s forces did try to appropriate the symbols of Arab nationalism, as well. One of the pro-regime militias were named after Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Muscat radio broadcasted Nasserist songs from the 1950s. See Halliday, *Mercenaries*, 57.

<sup>77</sup> “Personal notes: Lessons Learnt by Lt Col (Retd) Alan Abbott, Int Corps MBE, GSO3 Int, HQ Dhofar Brigade, On Loan Service in 1975-77 under Brigadier John Akehurst.” As cited in Clive Jones, “Military Intelligence, Tribes, and Britain’s War in Dhofar, 1970-1976,” *Middle East Journal*, 65, no. 4, (2011): 563.

<sup>78</sup> In this sense, it was a continuation of British policies of nation-state building in the Middle East through the building of physical infrastructure. On this process in Jordan, see Yoav Alon, *The making of Jordan: Tribes, colonialism, and the modern state*, (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2007). On its ideological effects of making the new Jordanian state visible to the citizens, see Jonathan Endelman, “Displaying the state: visual signs and colonial construction in Jordan,” *Theory and Society*, 44 (2015): 212.

<sup>79</sup> Peterson, *Oman’s Insurgencies*, 392-393.

around Dhofar was hurting rebel morale and encouraging defection.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, these development projects were seen as necessities to counter what British officers saw as popular resentment of the Sultan's military spending in the Dhofar War.<sup>81</sup> Note that the officers clearly believed that these development projects needed to be advertised, anchored to a specific political message: this is the progress that Qaboos' rule will bring. Beginning with token gestures of new water wells, food distribution centers, and mosques, these British-led development projects became systematized by 1974.

Such projects eventually expanded nationwide. They demilitarized their "hearts and minds" strategy of promising of a new social contract, and used it as a tool of state- and nation-building. Much of Oman's bureaucratic state was born of this process, as development programs were deployed in other parts of Oman to win loyalty to the Sultan, first in those areas of the greatest importance to the British, and later to the rest of the nation. For example, after the Dhofari rebels either defected to the side of the Sultan or fled the country, ending the Dhofar War in 1976, the non-violent elements of the "hearts and minds" playbook were deployed in the Musandam Peninsula, on account of its geostrategic location to control the Persian Gulf shipping lanes. The company Tetra Tech, owned by the former CIA agent James H. Critchfield, was tasked with developing the area to prevent local loyalties from "floating away," on account of the internal tribal

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<sup>80</sup> US Department of State, "Arabian Peninsula Discussion with British," *Wikileaks*, June 22, 1973, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973LONDON07238\\_b.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973LONDON07238_b.html).

<sup>81</sup> US Department of State, "Some Notes on Oman," *Wikileaks*, December 4, 1973, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973KUWAIT04205\\_b.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973KUWAIT04205_b.html).

divisions, cultural proximity to Iran, and a history of political allegiances to Sheikhs in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>82</sup>

The Qaboos regime's development projects created a buffer between people's well-being and the forces of nature. In doing so, they not only overthrew the previous Sultan's regime, but also the biological *ancienne regime* that had shaped the everyday lives of Omanis. The forces that once dictated people's well-being now appeared to be subject to further human control through new sources of wealth, technology, and bureaucratic organization. Everyday people in the new Oman would no longer starve or fall into debt and poverty during a drought or a bad fishing season. In the "renaissance," wealth comes from government salaries and food from supermarkets. Water is no longer a seasonal gift from God, but something that comes out of a faucet, fed by a desalination plant or a newly sunk well with motorized pump. Oman's notoriously craggy landscape no longer isolates villages by virtue of the long and difficult journey to a major city, as endless paved highways now make it a few hours' drive, to the shopping malls of Muscat or Salalah. Air-conditioning, luxury cars, and supermarkets are now part of people's daily existence.

These changes were not just material. They were used by the regime as symbols of a larger re-writing of the Omani social contract. Much like the new infrastructure of the New Deal era in the US, Qaboos' public works projects were given names to anchor their political meaning. Qaboos' namesake, or that of his era of rule, "*al nahda*," are used to name the major bridges, interstates, hospitals, schools, large, ornate mosques, and

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<sup>82</sup>See Christopher Dickey "Va. Firm has Big Role in Oman," *Washington Post*, March 24, 1986. Tetra Tech was also assigned to develop the interior region of Oman. Jeff Gerth, "Ex-Intelligence Agents are Said to have Major Roles in Oman," *The New York Times*, March 26, 1985.



universities that embody modern life for everyday people living in Oman. These attempts to advertise the regime through its modern infrastructure also occurred in rural areas. A UNDP program was shut down by the Ministry of Housing because it gave canvas tents to Omani herders. Although the movable tents were practical for the purposes of nomadic herders, the Minister thought they did not look “progressive” enough, and demanded that permanent cement buildings be provided instead.<sup>83</sup>

Qaboos’ public appearances and speeches more explicitly endorsed new ways for everyday Omanis to understand their well-being as a public good now provided by the state. Upon taking office, he gave speeches, broadcasted by a British radio station built for this purpose, which regularly emphasized the lack of public services under his father, and how he would be different.<sup>84</sup> Official rhetoric would continuously frame Oman as a “transformed” or “reborn land” dubbing the period of his rule the “renaissance” (*al nahda*). As early as 1974, Qaboos’ Foreign Minister was bragging in the foreign press how the Omanis have escaped the biological *ancienne regime*: “we have made great advances in the past six months... clouds of dust we have [are] not kicked up by camels, but by workshops of construction and progress.”<sup>85</sup> The statistics that would be relevant to an administrator became features of official rhetoric that framed the legitimacy of the Sultan in his public relations efforts. For example, in the initial years of Qaboos’ rule, all

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<sup>83</sup> Dawn Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman*, (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996) 139.

<sup>84</sup> Sarah G. Phillips and Jennifer S. Hunt, “‘Without Sultan Qaboos, We Would Be Yemen’: The Renaissance Narrative and the Political Settlement in Oman,” *Journal of International Development*, 29, (2017): 652.

<sup>85</sup> Reuters, “Zawawi Criticizes Gulf Nations for Abetting Dissidence,” *Kuwait Times*, February 23, 1974, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974KUWAIT00920\\_b.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974KUWAIT00920_b.html).

the way up to his recent obituaries, the number of schools, hospitals, and kilometers of roads built under his rule are all continually cited as indicators of his care for his people, and therefore the legitimacy of his rule. This narrative of the Sultan's agency in transforming the country would be so ensconced in public discourse that decades later researchers would regularly hear Omanis repeat, "without Sultan Qaboos we would be Yemen," referring to Oman's impoverished, war-torn neighbor.<sup>86</sup>

It should then be no surprise that the first recorded instances of state-provided disaster relief came under Qaboos, and that he framed it as a demonstration of national triumph. In 1977, a powerful cyclone hit Oman's Masirah Island. Its winds reached 140 miles per hour, dropping six-years' worth of rain in a single day. The storm killed 105 people, left thousands, or even tens of thousands homeless by flattening nearly all built structures on the island.<sup>87</sup> It also swept away thousands of livestock, and wiped out the island's few lime and palm orchards.

Unlike the aforementioned rural droughts, the response to the 1977 cyclone demonstrates an early application of the new social contract to a disaster. The residents of Masirah Island were rescued by the Omani military. The Sultan himself publicized the

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<sup>86</sup> Phillips and Hunt, 2017, 651. The extent to which this equivocation between Qaboos and the common good of all Omanis was successful could also be seen in the extent of anxiety and speculation around the fate of the country after the Sultan's death. His lack of an heir and poor health made public discussion of Oman's future politically incorrect, to say the least, and tempted private hopes that he has a secret heir that will emerge upon his death. Further underscoring the equivocation, when Qaboos died in 2020, the Royal Court abdicated their role in picking a new Sultan. It deferred to the Sultan's choice, which he had sealed in an envelope. One can reasonably speculate that in deferring to the Sultan's pick, they hoped the new Sultan would inherit some added legitimacy from Qaboos. Indeed, upon taking office, the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq, pledged to maintain continuity with Qaboos' policies.

<sup>87</sup> Death count is from Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, "Disaster History: Significant Data on Major disasters Worldwide, 1900-Present," Washington DC, (1993) 158, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNABP986.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABP986.pdf). The count of homeless varies between sources. The aforementioned document lists 5,000. Other sources count 20,000. For the latter, see "Aid Sent to Oman," *Spokesman Review*, June 23, 1977.

efforts as a show of the regime's competency in assisting these "citizens" (*muwatanyyn*) in his annual address to the Omani people later that year. He ennobled the relief effort as a demonstration of Oman's military strength, on par with its recent victory over a rebellion in the Dhofari region of Oman. In Qaboos' framing, the military demonstrated, "magnificent work in bringing help to *our people* when *our country* was struck by a violent hurricane earlier this year..."<sup>88</sup> Here we see for the first time in Oman an attempt to frame disaster response as a commentary on the legitimacy of the government, here portrayed as the deliverer of relief from such environmental dangers.

### **National Emergencies in Oman**

While the 1977 cyclone was publically framed in official rhetoric as something that happened to "Omani citizens" (*al muwatanyyn al omaniyyin*), illustrating the new vision of citizenship under Qaboos, the event was not understood as a national emergency. The disaster did not instigate public debate about how to respond to the urgency of the problem; nor did it beckon an *ad hoc*, national mobilization for relief efforts, as would Cyclone Gonu in 2007. In this section, I argue that the reason the disaster was treated as a national *event* and not a national *emergency* lies within the culture of time made possible by new communications technology. State control of the media in Oman precluded Omani citizens from understanding the event with any urgency.

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<sup>88</sup> Emphasis added. Sultan Qaboos, "Speech of His Majesty on the Occasion of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Day, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1977," *The Royal Speeches of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said*, Ministry of Information, 2015.

Historical records and oral history interviews show little public debate or concern with the disaster outside of Masirah Island.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, there seems to be a larger national amnesia of the event. In my field work in Oman, from 2014 to 2016, few Omanis that I spoke with had any knowledge of the disaster, with the obvious exception of people from Masirah Island itself. For the latter, these individuals recalled the government's response as a positive contribution to the island. The recovery process included building infrastructure and concrete houses for the residents, who until then, were largely living in shacks constructed from spare materials gleaned from the British air base on the island.<sup>90</sup> The larger national amnesia surrounding this event is also evidenced by the interviews conducted by a team of oral historians interviewing victims of Cyclone Gonu (2007). These individuals repeatedly stated that Gonu was the first storm of its kind to hit Oman.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> While I am using these records and interviews as evidence that there were no substantial political grievances as a consequence of this disaster, it is important to note the current limitations of my knowledge of this event. Published records that provide a window into Omani politics tend to drop off in the early 1970s. For example, John Townsend's insider account of the state-making process in the late 1960s and early 1970s was published in 1977, the year of the cyclone; it contains no reference to the event. Leaked diplomatic cables regarding the cyclone show no knowledge of political grievances, but that does not mean that they did not exist. It is possible that grievances did emerge and I have yet to uncover their documentation. It is also possible that they went undocumented because Omanis thought it too risky to voice them publicly.

<sup>90</sup> At the time of the storm, the British base was the only concrete buildings on the island. There is an apocryphal story that the tribes of Masirah had been forbidden by Sultan Faisal bin Turki (1888-1913) to build permanent housing on the island as punishment for the slaughter of 21 British sailors who arrived to the island on a life boat after their steamship, the *Baron Innerdale*, became disabled in 1904. Both the slaughter and the Sultan's execution of the killers are confirmed in the records of the British Under-Secretary of State for India. See "The Case of the S.S. 'Baron Innerdale,'" 21 March, 1905, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/ords/1905/mar/21/the-case-of-the-ss-baron-innerdale>. However there is no official acknowledgement of the ban on permanent housing, beyond rumors circulated among British soldiers stationed at Masirah in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, see "Masirah Island," Website, [http://home.kpn.nl/lilian\\_jan\\_schreurs/oman/Masirah.htm#A%20bit%20of%20History](http://home.kpn.nl/lilian_jan_schreurs/oman/Masirah.htm#A%20bit%20of%20History).

<sup>91</sup> See for example, Anonymous, "A02sur002," , Interview by Ali al Riymai, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann. It is also evidenced by Omani internet forums after Gonu, where writers worried

In terms of what Gonu meant to these individuals, they were correct that this storm was the first of its kind. Gonu, not the 1977 storm, would be the first to be treated as a national emergency. Omanis do not appear to have understood the 1977 hurricane as an urgent event calling for extraordinary action, as they would later storms. Most Omanis lived hundreds of miles away from the devastation and had a radically different experience of the storm cell than that of the residents of Masirah Island. Leaked US Embassy cables from the days surrounding the storm describe a placid atmosphere in the capital, more than two hundred miles away from Masirah, with people welcoming a refreshing change of weather on the day of the cyclone:

MAIN REACTION OF CAPITAL'S INHABITANTS WAS RELIEF THAT INCREASINGLY HOT SUMMER DAYS (TEMPERATURES GOING OVER 120 DEGREES F) WERE SUDDENLY BROKEN BY "COOL" SPELL HOVERING BELOW 100 DEGREES. RAIN SQUALLS AND WINDS IN CAPITAL WERE NOT A SERIOUS PROBLEM.

Even people living in Sur, the closest main-land population center to Masirah Island, reported no memory of the event to oral historians in 2007.<sup>92</sup> It appears that, on one hand, the few Omani citizens who had first-hand experience of the disaster understood the event as a demonstration of the Sultan's good governance, providing this far-flung island with the relief effort that reflects their membership in the national community under Qaboos.

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about their ignorance of the nation's cyclonic history, and called for an official investigation of previous storms in Oman so as to better inform government policy. See "hal hadith al 'aSar fee 'uman qabla hatha al 'aSar," *Sabla 'uman*, June 11, 2007, <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/archive/index.php/t-44538.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Some Omani residents speculate that this is the reason that many elderly Omanis there refused to believe the government warnings about Gonu. Anonymous, "A02sur002."

On the other hand, the majority of Omanis who had no first-hand experience of the event-learned of it through the lag and filter of the state-controlled media. The significance of this mediated experience is best understood in a broader consideration of how news media affects individuals' sense of time and membership in a political community. As Benedict Anderson argues, the rise of nationalism was made possible by the proliferation of cheap newspapers and novels which allowed people to imagine themselves as sharing a common territory and a common set of concerns with others within that territory.<sup>93</sup> The stories produced in these mediums created a sense of simultaneous existence, where individuals could imagine others carrying on with their own affairs "meanwhile." Anderson argues that this ability to imagine others plugging away in their lives simultaneous to our own was a precondition for making it possible for us to imagine a larger "national" community of individuals sharing a common fate, though never meeting each other in person.

The Omanis of 1977 had this capacity to imagine a national community. As demonstrated in the previous section, the discourse of national membership and the media technology that makes such understandings of membership plausible was on hand by virtue of a Qaboos' propaganda machine, starting with the establishment of weekly Arabic and English broadsheets and occasional radio addresses in 1970. Some town squares in the capital even hosted TV viewing sessions where the Sultan would appear on the screen and update the citizens on the ongoing battles against the rebels in the southern

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<sup>93</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22-26.

Dhofar region.<sup>94</sup> As this media was directed to report on the 1977 cyclone, Omanis could learn of the hardship of their fellow “citizens” in Masirah.

But what is crucial to this new capacity to think in terms of “meanwhile” is that Omani civilians could not learn of that hardship in *real-time*. The state-controlled news coverage did not inform the Omani public about the disaster until eight days after the fact.<sup>95</sup> This lag in official reporting was not for lack of information on the event. Leaked US cables reveal that the Omani government knew of the storm before it hit the island on June 13th, 1977. In less than 24 hours after landfall, it also communicated the island’s damage to the American and British military who had personnel stationed at the island. Nevertheless, it did not inform the Omani public. At this time, the state-controlled Omani newspaper, *‘uman*, was published twice a week, and released two editions following the storm with no mention of the disaster, including June 14th and June 18th. In the available archives, coverage of the storm first appears in the government press on June 21st. This delay was so significant that audiences reading *The Washington Post* in the US would have read about the disaster two days before Omanis would in their own papers. *‘uman* then gave the story front-page status for three more editions, June 21st, June 25th, and July 2nd, describing the destruction and recovery effort.

Stephen Kern’s work helps explain the significance of this lag in public information. He has shown how the invention of the telegraph provided a sense of

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Author, February 22, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> US Embassy, “Initial Report of Cyclone Damage,” Wikileaks Cable: 1977MUSCAT00918. Dated June 14, 1997, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977MUSCAT00918\\_c.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977MUSCAT00918_c.html). For Omani and American news coverage, see *‘uman*, 1977, June 21, 25 and July 2, 1977, Vol 4, no 320-322; and “Hurricane Fatal to 50 in Oman,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1977.

“overarching *simultaneity*” that allowed people to learn of major events *as they happened*. It became possible to have a more specific, real-time sense of “meanwhile” than provided by daily newspapers. For example, the sinking of the *Titanic* was communicated through wireless telegraph, allowing for people to imagine the horror as it unfolded in those very moments, not after the fact.<sup>96</sup>

The difference between these two kinds of simultaneity is crucial to understanding the lack of political impact made by the 1977 cyclone. While the Omanis of 1977 did have Anderson’s more general sense of “meanwhile,” they did not have the urgent, real-time sense described by Kern. The lag was not due to a lack of media technology in Oman. It was because the Omani state monopolized the means of informing the public imagination of events as they happened elsewhere. The lag in information conveniently gave enough time for the Ministry of Information to finally report the event as a problem already being solved. The effect was that the Omani public audience outside of Masirah would not learn of an emergency but of a “cyclone” (*‘aSar*) or a “nagging disaster” (*al kartha al mazeja*) that happened more than a week ago and was already being addressed by state authorities.<sup>97</sup> The understanding of urgency was contained to the official channels of information, keeping the public in the dark. It was not plausible for those outside of official channels to conceive of this national event as a national emergency—an ongoing problem demanding urgent mobilization. Instead, the

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 78.

<sup>97</sup> Quotes are from *‘uman*, 1977, July 2, 1977, 5, no. 323.



Omani public could only learn of this event as a problem being solved by the state authorities, who are already on the ground fulfilling their role in new social contract.

To clarify the political significance of the distinction I am making here between a national event and a national emergency in Oman, consider two purported coup attempts by small circles of Islamic dissidents, one in 1994 and 2005.<sup>98</sup> In both cases, the Omani regime announced news of the alleged threats only after the purported coups were averted and the alleged perpetrators were arrested. While both events were of dire national importance, everyday Omanis were unable to understand them as emergencies because they had no knowledge of the alleged problem until it was reported as solved by state authorities. With no direct knowledge of the event, most Omanis were left to speculate about it after the fact, based upon rumors and official accounts. For example, popular speculation abounds that there were no actual plans for a coup, and that these arrests were pretexts for squashing religious teaching and organizing outside of official institutions.<sup>99</sup> The public question is one of retrospection, “what was that?”, and not of emergency—“what must be done now?” The stakes are different, perhaps lower, because there is no impending, uncertain future that makes the answer appear pressing to the audience. In Calhoun’s words, “the emergency imaginary” is absent.

As the subsequent chapter will show, this manner of interpreting national events is in stark contrast to what happened during and after Cyclone Gonu. In that case, the suffering and death dealt by the storm was understood by hundreds of thousands of

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<sup>98</sup> For details on these coup attempts, see Valeri, *Oman*, 194.

<sup>99</sup> For popular skepticism on the regime’s narrative of these events, see Harith al-Ghassany, *Kitman and Renaissance: Domination and the Limits of Development*, (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 1995), 185-186.

Omanis in real-time, whether through first-hand experience or through the flow of social media images that were out of the control of government censors, despite their best efforts. The 1977 cyclone, like the purported coups, was publically framed by official communications as a problem already being solved by the authorities—a social contract fulfilled. In contrast, Gonu was a plainly tangible emergency with a solution held in suspense for the broader public to contemplate, argue about, and mobilize for. For Gonu there was a plurality of interpretations participating in a broader production of meaning. In contrast, in 1977, there was a monologue; public meaning was delivered from on high, in a context in which the situation was plausibly construed as an accomplishment of state power to respond to disaster, rather than a question of whether it could. For this reason, the 1977 hurricane never put Qaboos' regime on trial. Indeed, it became a feature of Qaboos' propaganda. The disaster recovery was made a spectacle of the promise of Qaboos' rule, illustrating the capacity of his regime to protect citizens from the forces of nature.

### **Conclusion**

I have shown here that prior to the Qaboos regime, Omani's appealed to a variety of natural and supernatural understandings of disasters. While these various frameworks provided some possibility for attributing moral or political causes to disasters, there was little commentary on the significances of disaster response, especially regarding who was responsible for what. The Omani state does not appear to have provided much in terms of disaster response, nor does it appear that everyday Omanis expected it to.

Indeed, these expectations reflect the political context of pre-1970s Oman. The previous Sultans of what was then called “Muscat,” and today, the larger territory of “Oman,” had overseen a minimalist, feudal state until the 1970s, wherein political authority was often fragmented among local tribal authorities, and the potential influence of the Imams of the interior, prior to their ouster in 1954. Moreover, the Sultan’s sovereignty entailed minimal intervention into the lives of everyday Omanis, after disasters or otherwise. This minimalist state approach was initially favored by the British sponsors of earlier Sultans as a mode of colonial sovereignty that protected their access to Omani ports.

But the shifting context of international and domestic pressures to disassemble the British Empire changed the British’s approach to rule. In the eyes of imperial reformers, propping up a regional ally in Oman required establishing a new kind of state, and a new kind of citizen. The “modernizing” regime of Sultan Qaboos attempted to quell a rebellion and make itself popular among civilians in part by promising modern progress to all Omanis. For my purposes, key to this new vision of authority was the notion that the state would liberate citizens from the dangers of the biological *ancienne regime*, which included protecting them from the forces of nature. This new discourse of citizenship helps us understand why the hardships of natural disasters did not generate political grievances until very recently. The notion that Omanis can expect help from their government in the aftermath of disaster is a very new development in the country.

But showing the emergence of this way of conceptualizing state responsibility is not enough to explain how disasters became unplanned political spectacles in Oman. The new communications technology in Oman have also mediated how political authority is

evaluated. Omanis have only very recently had the capacity to learn about nationally significant events in real-time, including natural disasters. Prior to such changes in communication technology, Omanis' ability to size-up their rulers according to the new social contract and in light of an urgent, *unsolved problem* was limited to local events of which they had direct knowledge. In contrast, national events, problems happening to citizens outside of one's personal networks, were learned about in retrospect, as having been already addressed by the state. The records of the 1977 cyclone appear to substantiate this claim. The capacity of Omanis to use a national emergency to evaluate the performance of their government is a very new development in the country, which I will examine in detail in the subsequent chapter.

I have thus provided evidence that political grievances in Oman are not automatically generated out of universal, psychological needs, but have been derived from discursive repertoires that change over time. Like in the case of the US, understanding disaster contention requires that we investigate when and how the discursive frameworks that give meaning to the disaster and its consequences became so prominent. As I have argued above, central to the story is the role of the British colonial powers and how they believed they could secure their interests in the region by propping up local rulers who were seen as guardians of their population's well-being, and replacing those rulers who were not. In exporting their own visions of modern, "good government" to Oman, they made such discourses into powerful frameworks for discussing political belonging and responsibility. In framing such top-down improvements upon the everyday lives of people as being synonymous with being an Omani under Qaboos' rule,

they created a symbolically powerful way for people to understand their *new* relationship with the state and their fellow citizens.<sup>100</sup>

Associating Qaboos with the promises of modern order and prosperity was an effective means of securing popular support for the regime, especially when the government had so much oil wealth to throw at this performance. As part of this new vision, disasters became events that were about the state and citizenship, and thus opportunities for the Sultan to curate a public image of progress and good governance, especially when the public's knowledge of such improvements was limited to first-hand experience and state-controlled media.

But as chapter five shows, this new stage also becomes the site of contestation, allowing dissidents to put the state and the status-quo on trial. Qaboos' new social contract inadvertently created the conditions in which such a regime could be discredited by large-scale natural disasters. As new media technology gives Omanis access to real-time information outside of official channels, disasters, now understood as national emergencies, are not merely being framed by officials, but by dissidents as well.

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<sup>100</sup> In this sense, it was a case of what Eisenstadt calls "multiple modernities," wherein Western notions of progress and national identity spread to developing countries and are subsequently combined with local cultures and institutions. See Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, 129, no. 1, 2000: 15.

**CHAPTER 4:**  
**CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL CONTESTATION AFTER HURRICANES**  
**KATRINA AND SANDY**

Hurricanes have become reliable occasions for anti-Trump political satire, each playing off the apparent mismatch between his conduct and public expectations of presidential leadership in times of emergency. Consider the following examples. “Nabisco Baffled After Trump Administration Gives It \$200 Million Contract To Rebuild Puerto Rico’s Roads.”<sup>1</sup> The joke in this 2017 headline from the satirical newspaper *The Onion* plays upon the public weariness toward an aloof statesman off-loading to a cookie company the duty to provide disaster recovery to its citizens.<sup>2</sup> A year later, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* made an illustrated children’s book about the President’s visit to areas damaged by Hurricane Florence (2018) as a fundraising effort for hurricane victims. The text and the book’s title, “Whose Boat is this Boat?” is “accidentally” authored by Trump himself, as it is composed of his verbatim comments during his visit to the disaster zone. The joke of the project plays off of the apparent gap

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<sup>1</sup> The Onion, “Nabisco Baffled After Trump Administration Gives It \$200 Million Contract To Rebuild Puerto Rico’s Roads,” October 26, 2017, <https://politics.theonion.com/nabisco-baffled-after-trump-administration-gives-it-20-1819886593>.

<sup>2</sup> The fake headline referenced the widely publicized cases of the Trump administration handing out government contracts to private companies with no qualifications for the duties that they would be charged with, such as the 300 million dollar contract for rebuilding Puerto Rico’s electric grid that was given to a Montana company with only two full-time employees. Richard Wolffe, “The forgotten scandal in the Trump administration: Hurricane Maria,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/11/trump-scandal-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico>.

between the President's response to the disaster, which appeared rambling and off topic, and the somber recognition of American suffering that the public purportedly expects of their political leadership.<sup>3</sup> A year later, Trump was lampooned again for his conduct regarding Hurricane Dorian (2019). Then, he had falsely tweeted that the storm was projected to hit Alabama, prompting the National Weather Service to issue an apparent refutation of his claim. In response, Trump appeared on television with a map charting the projected path of the storm. The map had a black circle that appeared to have been drawn on with a sharpie marker, conspicuously altering the printed map to include Alabama within the storm's path. Social media quickly filled with mockery, accusing Trump of doctoring the presumably authoritative map to fit his mistake in warning Alabama. The mockery included other photos similarly doctored by sharpie markers to make the image fit Trump's politics. For example, an image of open desert, presumably at US border, received a drawn-on wall; images of the sparse crowd at Trump's 2016 inauguration ceremony received a larger audience of stick-figures to match his boasts of crowd size.<sup>4</sup>

While these mockeries might just be petty squabbles, they point to a more consequential universe of political competition that disasters make possible today. This chapter examines how officials and dissidents are politicizing the tangible manifestations of climate change in light of recent, extraordinarily powerful hurricanes in the US. I find

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<sup>3</sup> The book sold over 400,000 copies and raised 1.25 million dollars. Hillel Italie, "Trump spoof book 'Whose Boat is this Boat?' raises 1.25 million," *SFGate*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Trump-spoof-book-Whose-Boat-Is-This-Boat-13489671.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Stewart, "The incredibly absurd Trump/Cnn SharpieGate feud, explained," *Vox*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/9/6/20851971/trump-hurricane-dorian-alabama-sharpie-cnn-media>.

that the kinds of politics that these disasters make possible complicate theories as to the relationship between calamity and political power. Disasters are not merely occasions for government officials to assert power, as some kind of technocratic, authoritarian opening as some scholars fear.<sup>5</sup> Not only are citizens politicizing these events, calling the government into account for its inability to provide material protections against the suffering of disaster, as the Maslowians would expect, they go on to do much more.

Officials and dissidents treat the mass devastation wrought by hurricanes as unplanned political spectacles whose meaning is up for grabs. Political entrepreneurs attempt to frame the images of suffering and aid to tell a larger story of citizenship, ennobling values beyond safety and prosperity. The post-disaster agenda is complicated by those who are making disaster response into symbols of national character, invoking values of equality, piety, strength, solidarity, and heroism. Thus, these emergencies generated by large cyclones are being made into stages upon which the public evaluates not just a material needs-meeting government, but broader values upon which both government and civil society actors are evaluated.

Government officials thus respond to disasters with more than just humanitarian logistics. They similarly try to frame these moments of public attention and debate, promoting meaning of the unplanned political spectacle that either deflects criticism or generates their own political capital. Officials enter into the debate, attempting to

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<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, 21; Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, (New York: Zone Books, 2010); and Craig Calhoun, "A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order," *CRSA/RCSA*, 41, no. 4, (2004).



forward their own version of events, contesting or appropriating these discursive frames to defend their office. In doing so, they take on multiple roles, advertising their capacity as technocrats, but also as leaders witnessing and standing in solidarity with those suffering, and as an appreciative audience to civic volunteerism and piety. It is through this discursive contestation over American citizenship that these attention-grabbing, tangible manifestations of climate change are being given meaning in public discourse.

In the sections that follow, I examine the contested process of public meaning-making after Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. I show that officials and dissidents treat the devastation of these hurricanes as unplanned political spectacles which implicate state authorities and the larger status quo. Preexisting social and political visions for the nation shaped the political fallout of these disasters, as officials and dissidents drew upon them to attribute meaning to the disaster. These contests made the disasters contentious, not unmet psychological needs, as Maslowians would claim. The disasters were at once understood as a material problem that governments ought to solve, ennobling the authority of the technocrat. But at the same time, they were also treated as unsolvable problems for the broader nation to heroically address through acts of solidarity and/or piety. Instead of just calls for “adapting” or “recovering,” what emerged was a broader set of conflicting visions for the role of official experts and the mobilization of laymen to address emergencies. Political entrepreneurs seized upon these hurricanes-cum-spectacles to draw public concern to larger frames of meaning, attempting to tell a larger story about the American state and the national community.

### **Contestation in the Debris of Hurricane Katrina**

Hurricane Katrina was the third-most deadly storm to hit the US, directly causing 1200 deaths. With a price tag of \$160 billion in damage, it the most costly hurricane in US history, surpassing what was then the second most costly, Hurricane Andrew (1992), by a factor of three.<sup>6</sup> The public, visible character of this devastation provided the people of the Gulf Coast with a sense that they had just experienced an event of major destruction to their public goods and private lives. Moreover, the media publicized the destruction in real time, allowing a wider American public to experience the event vicariously.

From the initial approach of the storm to the eventual bursting of the levies and subsequent flooding, the media coverage of the storm evolved over time. At first, it was covered as a typical disaster for technocrats to address. The *New York Times* coverage of the destruction on the first day of impact was typical. Writing the morning before the levees broke, and thus prior to the largest amounts of destruction in New Orleans, the article documents the initial destruction, enumerating the different areas along the coast that were damaged, and quoting local and federal leaders, including President Bush and then-head of FEMA Michael Brown, who were giving advice on how to stay safe among the debris. The article depicts a government well-prepared, citing logistics already in

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<sup>6</sup> Figure is adjusted for inflation to 2017 currency. Note that since Katrina there have been three other hurricanes that have also surpassed Andrew's price tag, including Harvey (2017), Sandy (2012), and Irma (2017). See National Hurricane Center, "Costliest U.S. Tropical Cyclones Tables Updated," *U.S. Department of Commerce: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/news/UpdatedCostliest.pdf>.

place prior to the storm's landfall.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the hurricane created a national emergency for the nation to watch, wherein urgent, extraordinary action by the government was expected, and apparently in place.

But this expectation would soon be broken, and the coverage shifted to frame Katrina as a political spectacle. As the levees collapsed, water gushed to cover an additional 100,000 homes. Scenes from New Orleans quickly generated a theatre of human suffering and chaos, with the government overwhelmed, unable to answer. In an example that was typical of the media's new framing, *The New York Post* quoted the head of emergency operations for New Orleans who drew an unfavorable comparison between the response to Katrina and the response to the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami: "This is a national emergency. This is a national disgrace... FEMA has been here three days, yet there is no command and control. We can send massive amounts of aid to tsunami victims [in other countries], but we can't bail out the city of New Orleans."<sup>8</sup> Note the national framing and appeal to the values of citizenship in the quote: if we can help *them* after disaster, we should be able to help our own.

This notion in the media coverage that the technocrats were functionally absent when urgently needed applied to more than humanitarian concerns with the flooded out civilians. Officials and the media engaged in an "elite panic" about social disorder, each exaggerating reports of looting and violence to a public audience, often criminalizing

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph B. Treaster and Kate Zernike, "Hurricane Katrina Slams into Gulf Coast; Dozens are Dead," *New York Times*, August 30, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/30/us/hurricane-katrina-slams-into-gulf-coast-dozens-are-dead.html?searchResultPosition=25>.

<sup>8</sup> Lukas I. Alpert, "Nightmare of Robbery, Filth, Death & Rape in Superdome," *New York Post*, September 2, 2005, <https://nypost.com/2005/09/02/nightmare-of-robbery-filth-death-rape-in-superdome/>.

African Americans.<sup>9</sup> Although they turned out to be false rumors, the Mayor and the Police Superintendent reported as fact that civilians were murdering each other and that a baby was raped in the Superdome where civilians had taken shelter by the thousands. These authorities also falsely reported that rescue helicopters and law enforcement officers were being shot at by panicked civilians.<sup>10</sup> Such an image of public disorder shaped a number of government and civilian responses to Katrina. It led to the deployment of the National Guard to keep order in the streets; it slowed the deployment of rescue missions for fear of violence against aid workers; and officials in the neighboring town of Gretna ordered law enforcement to shoot evacuees who attempted to flee across a bridge into their town.<sup>11</sup> It also prompted the formation of armed neighborhood vigilantes, who shot African Americans attempting to flee to higher ground.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, a prominent version of the political spectacle was that of a technocratic government on trial for its failure of duty in a moment of national emergency. Both elite and grass-roots dissidents were making the destruction, suffering, and apparent disorder into symbols of government failure on account of its inability to respond quickly and effectively to the emergency. Michael Ignatieff exemplified this dissent when he wrote

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<sup>9</sup> Adeline Masquelier, "Why Katrina's Victims Aren't Refugees: Musings on a 'Dirty' Word," *American Anthropologist*, 108, no. 4 (2006): 735-743.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Associate Press, "'Desperate SOS' from Mayor," *The Denver Post*, May 8, 2016, <https://www.denverpost.com/2005/09/01/desperate-sos-from-mayor/>.

<sup>11</sup> Channing Joseph, "Police Chief Says He Exaggerated Post-Katrina Crime," *The New York Sun*, August 21, 2006, <https://www.nysun.com/national/police-chief-says-he-exaggerated-post-katrina/38268/>.

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Thompson, "New Evidence Surfaces in Post-Katrina Crimes," *The Nation*, July 11, 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/new-evidence-surfaces-post-katrina-crimes/>.

in the *New York Times*, “when the levees broke, the contract of American citizenship failed.”<sup>13</sup> Prominent news magazines also made this point in their cover images, all using photos of African Americans in distress under headings like, “the Shaming of America,” “System Failure,” and “Why Bush Failed.”<sup>14</sup>

The reasons behind the technocratic failure were variously attributed to problems of racism and classism on the one hand, and government cronyism and bumbling incompetence on the other. For example, national advocates for the African American community charged that the suffering caused by the hurricane was multiplied on account of the racism of the Bush administration. Reverend Al Sharpton articulated this narrative to the Press:

I feel race was a factor [in the response to Katrina]. Why? I remember almost a year ago to the day I was in Florida when a hurricane was coming, not a point four, not a point five, and I saw the White House move. I saw the government of the president’s brother move. National Guard was already alerted before the storm ever hit. It seems to me that if we can be alert in Palm Beach, Florida, we could have been alert in New Orleans.<sup>15</sup>

This sentiment received much more publicity three days earlier when Kanye West went off-script during a live fundraiser on NBC. In his statements, he criticized the accusations of African American looters, emphasized that Katrina victims are

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The Broken Contract,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/25/magazine/the-broken-contract.html>.

<sup>14</sup> The Economist, “The Shaming of America,” *The Economist*, September 8, 2005, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2005/09/08/the-shaming-of-america>. Time Magazine, “System Failure,” *Time Magazine*, September 19, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20050919,00.html>; and Newsweek, “Poverty, Race, and Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Al Sharpton, “Rev. Al Sharpton: President Bush’s Response ‘Inexcusable’,” *Democracy Now!* September 5, 2005, [https://www.democracynow.org/2005/9/5/rev\\_al\\_sharpton\\_president\\_bushs\\_response](https://www.democracynow.org/2005/9/5/rev_al_sharpton_president_bushs_response).

predominately African American, claimed that had the military not been in Iraq, they would have been able to help in New Orleans, and that the military had been given permission to shoot African Americans; and in a statement that went viral, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people.”<sup>16</sup> Reverend Jesse Jackson expressed similar sentiments, adding that African Americans should be appointed to leadership positions in the recovery effort, on account of most of the victims being African American.<sup>17</sup> Other prominent activists in the African American community, such as the civil rights lawyer and founder of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Chokwe Lumumba, declared that Katrina ought to reinvigorate the African American struggle for equality. Recalling the highly publicized photographs within the African American press of the mutilated body of the 14-year-old Emmett Till, which helped galvanize participation in the Civil Rights movement, Lumumba stated that Katrina was “the Emmett Till of our generation.”<sup>18</sup>

Other prominent voices in the national public denounced or deliberately avoided such charges. Columnists in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Boston Globe* dismissed the above accusations against the Bush administration as “racial paranoia.”<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> West made this accusation on live television during a celebrity-driven fundraiser for the American Red Cross. Kanye West, “Kanye West Hurricane Katrina,” *Youtube*, March 3, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pVTnxCZaQ>.

<sup>17</sup> Doug Simpson, “Jesse Jackson lashes out at Bush over Katrina response,” *Associated Press*, September 2, 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080327035254/http://www.wwltv.com/local/stories/wwl090205jackson.1c68e297.html>.

<sup>18</sup> In 2013, Lumumba would later be elected as the Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. His hopes on the political salience of Katrina were noted in Rachel Luft, “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism: Social Movement Developments in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina,” *American Quarterly*, 61, no. 3 (2009): 502-506. Jordan Flaherty, *Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 418.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Dawson, “After the Deluge: Publics and Publicity in Katrina’s Wake,” *Du Bois Review*, 3, no. 1, (2006): 247.

Congressional Black Caucus withheld charges of racism in their public statement on Katrina, instead claiming the slow federal response was because most of the victims were poor.<sup>20</sup>

The mainstream press as well as congressional Democrats more often leveled charges of cronyism and incompetence against the Bush administration. In this sense, Katrina was a “predictable and predicted hurricane,” that a properly functioning bureaucracy should have been able to handle.<sup>21</sup> Bush’s sin was allowing political favors to corrupt the rule of experts in putting an amateur, Michael Brown, at the head of FEMA. Media coverage focused on how Brown lacked any expertise to be leading the Katrina response. It described how he came to the Bush administration through a thirty-year old friendship with Joe Allbaugh, Bush’s campaign director in the 2000 presidential election. Brown’s most recent job experience had been ensuring that the judges at horse shows followed the rules, a position he kept off his public resume after his appointment to FEMA.<sup>22</sup> It was also uncovered that he was asked to resign from that position for potentially taking bribes; and he was castigated in a *Time* exposé that demonstrated that

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<sup>20</sup> USA Today, “Black lawmakers angry about federal response to Katrina,” September 9, 2005, [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-09-02-katrina-blackcaucus\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-09-02-katrina-blackcaucus_x.htm).

<sup>21</sup> This is the wording of Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman in the Senate hearing on Katrina. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, “Transcript: Senate Hearing on Government’s Response to Hurricane Katrina,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/10/national/nationalspecial/senate-hearing-on-governments-response-to-hurricane.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Shane, “Michael DeWayne Brown: Facing Blame in a Disaster,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/07/us/nationalspecial/michael-dewayne-brown-facing-blame-in-a-disaster.html>.

other parts of his public resume were fabricated, including a claim that for years he was “overseeing the emergency services division” for the city of Edmond, Oklahoma.<sup>23</sup>

Media commentary put Brown’s actions after Katrina under similar scrutiny. His most embarrassing moment came when he demonstrated the extent to which he was aloof from the latest, urgent details of the national emergency. In a televised interview he revealed that he was unaware of the 20,000 evacuees who were taking shelter at the convention center, despite the fact that this was widely reported upon for the last 24 hours. In response, several high-profile Senators called for his resignation, leading to congressional hearings on the conduct of Brown and his team. These hearings made public several emails between Brown and other parts of his team, which provided several anecdotes for critics to seize upon, illustrating his lack of seriousness and concern during the emergency. For example, the emails demonstrate a preoccupation with what Brown should wear in his public appearances, and asking FEMA personnel on the ground to make sure that he and his staff would not have to wait too long to be served at an up-scale restaurant during his visits to the disaster area—all while evacuees remained in the squalor of the convention center.

But dissidents did not merely frame the storm as a problem of technocratic failure, wherein the proper response is a return to normal through top-down governance as quickly as possible. Grassroots organizations mobilized to make the disaster response into a venue for social and political transformation. This mobilization included

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<sup>23</sup> Daren Fonda and Rita Healy, “How Reliable is Brown’s Resume?” *Time*, September 8, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1103003,00.html>.



intervening in public discussions around Katrina in attempts to anchor the meaning of the spectacle to goals beyond material recovery, such as the spread of Christian piety or the pursuit of social and racial justice. It also included the organization of relief efforts that took direct action toward these goals, for example the building of Churches or activist networks in the rubble, and orienting the work of volunteers, including some of the 1.5 million arriving from other areas. Both of these mobilizations saw the disaster as something requiring more than a return to the status-quo, and the national mobilization of federal, state, and civilian actors as an opportunity to pursue these goals. They called for a transformation of the larger values of American society, and used the recovery effort as a venue for pursuing these ends.

Christian organizations were among the most prominent of the estimated five hundred new charities formed to funnel money and logistics to the recovery effort. Measured in terms of funding, among the top-ten charities involved with the recovery efforts, six of them were run by Christian organizations.<sup>24</sup> While providing material resources to disaster victims was a central goal of these organizations, some of these faith-based relief efforts would also include, or even foreground religious evangelism and the promotion of Christian piety among the denizens of New Orleans. Adam's ethnographic work on this aspect of the Katrina recovery effort describes how some of these volunteers saw Katrina as "the ultimate missionary tool—an opportunity to 'win souls for Christ...'" She quotes one evangelical organization stating, "[The recovery

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<sup>24</sup> Jacqueline L. Salmon and Leef Smith, "Two-Thirds of Katrina Donations Exhausted," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2006. As cited in Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013): 133-134.

effort] really has very little to do with repairing buildings; it's repairing lives. The goal in New Orleans is not to return lives 'back to normal.' Rather, the goal is to reshape people spiritually so they have a strengthened new capacity for life."<sup>25</sup> This activity is illustrated in one "success story" documented by an evangelical organization's promotional materials: "After striking up a conversation with the group, who expressed their gratitude to Southern Baptists for serving their neighborhood, [a volunteer] led one of the young men to faith in Christ. It would be the first of eight people he would lead to Christ in less than three hours."<sup>26</sup>

Christian salvation was not the only gospel heard among the rubble. Grassroots organizers used the national mobilization in the disaster zone to spread their messages of citizen power and social justice, attempting to integrate these ideas into the public debate. One prominent form that this took was the contestation over the appropriateness of state authority and the power of big-business in shaping people's lives, as well as experiments in self-governance outside the logic of technocratic problem-solving.

We can see this activity in how already existing social movement organizations shifted their efforts into new areas in light of the disaster. For example, the tenants' rights organization ACORN mobilized to protect African American and lower-income families from eviction and property demolition in the aftermath of the storm. Similarly, local members of the national feminist organization INCITE! founded a clinic for

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<sup>25</sup> Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith*, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Tobin Perry, "A decade later, Katrina viewed as defining event for Baptist Relief," *North American Mission Board*, August 18, 2015, <https://www.namb.net/news/a-decade-later-katrina-viewed-as-defining-event-for-baptist-relief/>.

women's healthcare in the aftermath of Katrina, anticipating that the recovery effort would otherwise revert to what they saw as racist programs of population control that targeted African American women.<sup>27</sup>

The disaster also provided a venue for new activist mobilization. Much of this was done for the sake of providing immediate relief to Katrina victims, but within a larger vision for political reform. For example, "The New Orleans Workers' Center" emerged to protect from abuse the day laborers who arrived to New Orleans after the disaster, and later came to organize against the visa restrictions for these temporary guest workers. "Safe Streets" emerged as an emergency relief group, conducting triage in the streets, but eventually turned to advocate for reform of the criminal justice system.<sup>28</sup>

Anarchists and a former Black Panther activist also founded the "Common Ground Collective," organizing anywhere between 13,000 and 23,000 volunteers to provide rescue and relief services to Katrina victims. Many of these volunteers were white college students who traveled to New Orleans to help during holiday breaks, and were put to work serving African American, low-income communities in the disaster zone through a program that the organization dubbed, "Roadtrip Relief," modeled after the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights movement. The more permanent participants formed clinics and aid distribution centers. On guard against what they saw as co-optation efforts by state agencies, they continuously refused resources from FEMA. They saw their aid as a form of sustaining dissident communities, harkening to the

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<sup>27</sup> Luft, "Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism," 502-506.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

“survival programs” of the Black Panther Party.<sup>29</sup> The organization also joined other activist groups in direct action and protests against eviction, helping families re-occupy their homes post-eviction.

Aside from these tangible goals of providing relief, recovery, and alliances against eviction, members of the Common Ground Collective also attempted to change the way that volunteers and community members understood their own ability to self-govern and change larger structures.<sup>30</sup> Scott Crow, one of the Collective’s founders, describes this work in the following way: “Not a seizure of state power, but a revolution of a different kind, the revolution of exercising grassroots power to make the changes we all wanted to see. Our revolution challenged the standard pessimism about people’s limited agency in their own lives.” Elsewhere he went on to say, “We are developing ways to move beyond just protesting the ills of the world. We are creating just and sustainable practices and opening other possibilities for the futures.”<sup>31</sup> Note how this vision sees disaster response as a necessarily political task, rather than a technocratic one. Hence, it is not government experts who can provide for these communities. Beyond the

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<sup>29</sup> One of the organization’s founders, Malik Rahim, was a former member of the Black Panther Party. This connection to the survival programs is from Ibid., 509.

<sup>30</sup> To put it in the language of social movement scholarship, the organization used the hurricane as an opportunity to mobilize people into political action through framing work. They “bridged” like-minded individuals by doing out-reach activity both inside and outside the disaster zone. They also “amplified” the values of social justice in the context of the hurricane, as well as the beliefs of participants regarding their efficacy in making the recovery efforts more effective and just. On these different modes of framing work, see David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review*, 51, no. 4 (1986): 464-481.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Crow, *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011).

immediate value of aid is the larger goal of building mutual aid networks for further social justice activism, or what Crow referred to as “revolutionary infrastructure.”

In contrast to the Common Ground Collective, members of the African-American-led “People’s Hurricane Relief Fund” rejected the political value of providing direct services to disaster victims. They claimed that such projects pacified the African American community from seeking more radical change. Rather than redressing the post-Katrina grievances through aid, they sought to channel Katrina victims directly into political action. As such, they organized a tenants’ rights group and protested the state government of Louisiana and the company ICF International, which was employed to administer the ten-billion dollar re-housing program. The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund also attempted to mobilize international pressure on the Bush administration by documenting and reporting to the UN what they regarded as human rights violations of Katrina survivors, while advocating for a “right to return” for Katrina survivors.<sup>32</sup>

These and other examples of mobilization of Christian and social justice organizations not only contest the priority, or even the value, of state-set agendas of what a response to disasters should look like. They also tried to spread that understanding of Katrina to a public audience. In doing so, they intervened in public discussion to render the Katrina disaster as more than a technical problem. Rather than an accident or

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<sup>32</sup> They deliberately used this language to connect their plight to that of Palestinian refugees. Luft, “Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism,” 499-527.

aberration, the disaster was a more extreme version of chronic problems already plaguing the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Members of the Bush administration defended themselves from public attacks by forwarding a defense of their technocratic prowess. George W. Bush famously made a press event on the ground of New Orleans three days after the Hurricane where he congratulated the leaders of the federal response for getting food and medicine to people rapidly: “Brownie [Michael Brown], you’re doing a heck of a job.” Emails between Brown and his FEMA staff show a preoccupation with the public’s perception of him fitting into the role of a competent, engaged technocrat. Consider the following email from Brown’s Press Secretary in the initial weeks after Katrina.

From: Worthy, Sharon  
To: michael.d.brown[redacted]  
Subject: Your shirt

Please roll up the sleeves of your shirt... all shirts. Even the President rolled his sleeves to just below the elbow. In this crises [sic] and on TV you just need to look more hard-working... ROLL UP THE SLEEVES!<sup>34</sup>

Months later when these emails were made public in a Congressional hearing on the government failures surrounding Katrina, they were used to make him appear as someone pantomiming expertise. In those hearings, Brown would insist that his organization did

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>34</sup> Sharon Worthy, Email to Michael Brown, August 31, 2005, <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2005/images/11/03/brown.emails.pdf>.

everything it could and blamed the Department of Homeland Security and other bureaucracies for stepping on FEMA's preparation and response.<sup>35</sup>

But the Bush Administration also sought to protect itself from criticism by seizing upon public attempts to render the recovery effort as a reason to celebrate the national character. It framed Katrina as a demonstration of "our" ability to come together in the face of calamity and "bounce-back." They adopted rhetoric that emphasized the overwhelming, uncontrollable forces of nature, and the heroism of Americans in spite of the enormity of destruction. In an apparent attempt to counteract the image of him as being aloof—largely on account of continuing his vacation for two days after the storm hit—Bush toured the destruction on camera and made several speeches lionizing the government and civilian response, not in terms of their ability to control or conquer nature, but in a synergy between civilians and the state to serve one another.<sup>36</sup> For example, the White House praised "The Good News Camp," an evangelical Christian, expressly non-political grass-roots recovery effort that hosted approximately 17,000 volunteers.<sup>37</sup> Months later, Bush would frame this notion of synergy in his first State of

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<sup>35</sup> Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, "Transcript."

<sup>36</sup> The amount of criticism that his administration faced in what was commonly seen as a botched response to the Hurricane spawned a phrase to describe the political failures of future Presidents responding to unforeseen events. *The Washington Post* identified, twenty-three events that critics of the President labeled as "Obama's Katrina;" and critics of President Trump have similarly labeled his response to Hurricane Maria. Jaime Fuller, "Which of these 23 things was the MOST Obama's Katrina's moment? No one can decide." *Washington Post*, January 13, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/07/11/which-of-these-tk-things-was-the-most-obamas-katrinasmoment/?utm\\_term=.5b7deb67ef3d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/07/11/which-of-these-tk-things-was-the-most-obamas-katrinasmoment/?utm_term=.5b7deb67ef3d).

<sup>37</sup> The organization that organized the camp, the Disaster Pastor Network, emphasizes their anti-political nature on their website. "[We] are not a political organization and will not be involved in nor used as such. We are not protesters or demonstrators..." "About," Jerry Davis Disaster Pastor Network, <http://disasterpastor.net/about>.

the Union address after the hurricane. In that speech, he adopts some of the language of social justice advocates, but depoliticizes it by blurring the distinction between all actors, using words like “America,” “we,” “us,” and “society.” “America is a great force for freedom and prosperity. Yet our greatness is not measured in power or luxuries, but by who we are and how we treat one another. So we strive to be a compassionate, decent, hopeful society.” He went on to list progress in various social problems such as drug use and welfare reform, progress in science and education, before addressing Katrina specifically:

A hopeful society comes to the aid of fellow citizens in times of suffering and emergency—and stays at it until they're back on their feet. So far the federal government has committed \$85 billion to the people of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans. We're removing debris and repairing highways and rebuilding stronger levees. We're providing business loans and housing assistance. Yet as we meet these immediate needs, we must also address deeper challenges that existed before the storm arrived.

In New Orleans and in other places, many of our fellow citizens have felt excluded from the promise of our country. The answer is not only temporary relief, but schools that teach every child, and job skills that bring upward mobility, and more opportunities to own a home and start a business. As we recover from a disaster, let us also work for the day when all Americans are protected by justice, equal in hope, and rich in opportunity.<sup>38</sup>

While these dissident and official responses to Katrina utilize a variety of different framings of the disaster and what the proper response ought to be, they also share some core assumptions surrounding the discursive frameworks of citizenship and national emergency. The responses all agree that Katrina was an event that clarified who, if anyone, different groups of citizens could rely upon for help in the face of a national emergency. This clarification created a public trial for state authorities, and debates over

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<sup>38</sup> George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address by the President,” January 31, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2006/>.



the agency of everyday people in the aftermath of such events. As the media, officials, and civil society members conceived the identity of those suffering and those who could help in terms of citizens and state authorities, they all deployed a national framing to characterize much of their various political themes.<sup>39</sup> Many of these charges focused on accusations of administrative neglect—bad management—as the source of suffering. For example, the public contestation around the actions of the Bush administration in the aftermath of Katrina demonstrates this shared premise: it is the duty of the American government to serve disaster victims because they are American citizens. And when journalists began describing Katrina evacuees as “refugees,” for example, there was a public backlash against the foreign connotations of the label. This was taken-up by the Congressional Black Caucus, as well as Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton, who insisted that “refugee” is demeaning because “[they] are Americans.”<sup>40</sup> Some journalists defended their use of the term, not contesting the American character of the victims, but insisting that “refugee” appropriately described people fleeing from danger. Other news organizations, like *National Public Radio* and *The Washington Post*, conceded to the backlash and stopped or restricted their journalists from using the term.<sup>41</sup> President Bush also weighed in on the debate, likely perceiving it as an opportunity to respond to charges

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<sup>39</sup> A notable exception to this were the aforementioned migrant-worker advocacy groups that pre-existed Katrina.

<sup>40</sup> David Remnick’s coverage of Katrina for *The New Yorker* dismissed this as mere political correctness that distracts from the material hardships of those effected by the hurricane. See his “High Water: How Presidents and citizens react to disaster,” *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Masquelier, “Why Katrina’s Victims Aren’t Refugees,” 738.

of racism. Bush insisted, “The people we’re talking about are not refugees. They are Americans. And they need the help and love and compassion of our fellow citizens.”<sup>42</sup>

What these various representations of Katrina demonstrate is that the calamity was understood as more than just a terrible accident, or a “national tragedy,” in the language of fundraising efforts.<sup>43</sup> The public spectacle of the disaster made the widespread suffering of hurricane victims an object of common concern, and difficult to accept as natural. The suffering appeared unnecessary. Bush himself would later comment in his memoir on how the storm stimulated the political and sociological imagination of the viewing public.

Just as Katrina was more than a hurricane, its impact was more than physical destruction. It eroded citizens’ trust in their government. It exacerbated divisions in our society and politics. And it cast a cloud over my second term.<sup>44</sup>

It was as if political representatives, disaster victims, the media and the viewing public all received a prompt from the hurricane, “what does this destruction and suffering mean for us?” And a cacophony of responses followed.

Both elite and grassroots dissidents seized on the spectacle as a vehicle for mobilizing more people behind their cause. In their framing, the suffering was the sign of a mistake, or more acutely, an injustice. In the framing of public trial, the disaster was

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<sup>42</sup> Lou Dobbs, “Survivors of Hurricane Katrina face new deadly threats.” *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. CNN, (September 6, 2005), as cited in Louisa Edgerly, “Difference and Political Legitimacy: Speaker’s Construction of ‘Citizen’ and ‘Refugee’ Personae in Talk about Hurricane Katrina,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 75, no. 3 (2011): 311.

<sup>43</sup> This was the scripted terminology used in the now famous celebrity telethon in which Kanye West broke from script to emphasize that Katrina victims were mostly African American and poor and their suffering was on account of the racist government.

<sup>44</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, (New York: Random House, 2010).

an indictment of the government, calling for more attentive technocratic expertise in the halls of government. However, other dissidents used the disaster to forward alternative agendas, whether in the name of Christian piety or racial and social justice. Officials responded in kind, defending their technocratic bona fides, while also forwarding a parallel narrative of unmanageable threats and national triumph over adversity.

The overlap between these various framings of Katrina helps clarify the kinds of politics that ecological emergencies impel today. The disaster did not just beckon state and civil society actors to solve a commonly understood problem in a single location. Katrina helped to create an unplanned political spectacle, wherein authorities had to try and justify their power and what they were doing both to the disaster victims and to a larger national audience.<sup>45</sup> In this way, the public discussions of Katrina were made into an arena of defining citizenship and the proper role of state power in a world filled with hurricanes and other unpredictable threats to their well-being. The state response and the recovery agenda became avenues for a larger contest over defining the values of government beyond the immediate drama of the individual disaster.

### **Contestation in the Debris and Spectacle of Hurricane Sandy**

These hurricane-prompted competitions to capture the meaning of an unplanned political spectacle were not unique to Katrina. We see similar contests in the case of a very different hurricane. Hurricane Sandy (2012) was relatively destructive in terms of

death toll and the cost of destruction in comparison to average hurricanes, doing approximately 73.5 billion dollars' worth in damage in the US—the fourth most expensive hurricane in American history. It also killed 117 people, mostly in New York and New Jersey.<sup>46</sup> But this impact was nowhere near the level of Katrina, which was nearly twice as expensive and ten-times more deadly. Moreover, there was no specific constituency that was harmed, no equivalent to the African American urban poor of New Orleans. In terms of the social facts, Hurricane Sandy was both quantitatively and qualitatively different from Katrina. But the media, officials, and elite and grassroots dissidents similarly treated it as an unplanned political spectacle, at times, even likening it to Katrina. Indeed, they treated Sandy as a national emergency that could serve or hurt the careers of politicians and the platforms of grassroots organizers. What follows is an analysis of how such political entrepreneurs attempted to anchor the meaning of that spectacle.

Just as the Democratic representatives sought to damage the public image of the Bush Administration during Katrina, outspoken Republicans initially attempted to make Sandy into “Obama’s Katrina.” For example, Donald Trump, who just finished a failed run for the Republican presidential ticket, used his platform on twitter to make the

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<sup>46</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Deaths Associated with Hurricane Sandy – October – November 2012,” CDC Home, May 24, 2013, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6220a1.htm>.

comparisons days after the storm: “The federal gov. has handled Sandy worse than Katrina. There is no excuse why people don't have electricity or fuel yet.”<sup>47</sup>

Defending themselves in this trial, many of the state and federal representatives made public statements and appearances to demonstrate how well they provided relief and recovery resources, and made public displays of mourning and empathy for the disaster victims. While Obama halted his official campaign for reelection to oversee the relief effort, he spent much of this time giving speeches and posing for photo-ops with disaster victims among the rubble. It was a form of unofficial campaigning that was well understood by his opponents. In the words an advisor to Mitt Romney’s then-ongoing presidential campaign, “You have to strike a balance between looking presidential [by showing up to the disaster area], but not looking like you’re a politically crass politician who’s parachuting in for a photo-op.”<sup>48</sup>

Prominent media outlets provided the verdict on how well these performances went, evaluating them according to how well the politicians dually fit the roles of overseeing practical problems of recovery and giving national recognition to the suffering of American citizens. For example, the media castigated Mayor Bloomberg for not fitting into this role, responding to Sandy as *merely* a technical problem. Commentary by the *New York Times* asked why he was so tone-deaf, unaware of the consoling role that

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<sup>47</sup> Amelia Mavis Christnot, “A 2012 Tweet Criticizing the Response to Hurricane Sandy Just Came Back to Haunt Donald Trump,” September 13, 2018, <https://secondnexus.com/news/trump-tweeted-hurricane-sandy-electricity>.

<sup>48</sup> Kyle Cheney and Steven Shepard, “Clinton, Trump brace for Hurricane Matthew,” *Politico*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/hurricane-matthew-2016-clinton-trump-path-229200>.

he should be playing in the post-hurricane drama.<sup>49</sup> His public image was solely that of a technocrat responding to an emergency—an active problem-solver on the scene. His aides defended him according to the same manner of thinking: “The people in this city didn’t elect [him] three times to give him a hug... His focus is helping people restore their lives. That’s what he believes government is there to do.”<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to Bloomberg, President Obama and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s public appearances after the storm were praised by the press. Going beyond the technical problems posed by the storm, Obama and Christie were each photographed hugging residents, and Obama gifted holiday ornaments to a couple who turned a downed tree into a Christmas tree in their yard. Governor Andrew Cuomo and Senator Charles Schumer similarly posed for photos helping unload emergency supplies on the streets among other volunteers. Christie, who had been campaigning for Obama’s opponent in the 2012 presidential election, went so far as to heap public praises upon Obama for putting partisanship aside and acting as a national leader during the emergency. In

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<sup>49</sup> This criticism appeared despite Bloomberg’s attempts to make himself publically visible in the disaster zone, visiting damaged areas and speaking with residents a dozen times in the first two weeks after the storm. But in evaluating these visits, the public pundits were puzzled over his behavior. He did not announce these tours to the press, and instead had his own camera crew film some of them for his own youtube channel. Making it worse, the videos were botched. They clearly were intended to generate positive public relations after the storm, as they were edited and stage-managed to make it palpable to a viewing audience: the clips show the mayor in street clothes meeting and shaking hands with residents and men in military uniform on the ruined streets of New York City; the videos are just a few minutes long, edited to keep people’s attention by not showing a single scene more than half a minute; the Mayor and his interlocutors are always facing the camera as they talk and shake hands. Even when the Mayor is speaking with several people, they stand in a U-formation to face the camera, as if at a press conference, or actors on a set. Yet the videos are posted with no sound, making for an awkward, if boring viewing experience. Michael M. Grynbaum and David W. Chen, “Bloomberg Puts Soothing Aside as He Rushes to Bring Back City,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/nyregion/bloomberg-chooses-results-over-hugs-as-city-rebounds.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

response, conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch and other major campaign donors threatened Christie, making it clear to him that such public displays of bipartisanship in the rubble were undermining his potential as a future national candidate in the Republican Party.<sup>51</sup>

Environmentalists also saw an opportunity in the spectacle of Sandy, hoping to inject climate change into the political debate surrounding hurricanes. Perhaps the most prominent voices here were those of the environmentalist wing of the local Democratic leadership, with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg as its unofficial spokesman. They centered upon the notion that Hurricane Sandy was a manifestation of climate change, and as such, storms like Sandy would become more common in the future. This was consistent with their already existing political platforms. Since 2008, Bloomberg had been gathering expert climate and social scientists on panels to integrate climate change into urban planning of NYC, producing reports on climate change's local impacts, and how the city can reduce its CO2 emissions.<sup>52</sup> Mayor Bloomberg renewed these earlier initiatives to integrate climate change into urban planning after Sandy. Approximately two months after the storm, he established the Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, a research group tasked with proposing green infrastructure solutions to

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Barbaro, "After Obama, Christie Wants a G.O.P. Hug," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/us/politics/after-embrace-of-obama-chris-christie-woos-a-wary-gop.html>.

<sup>52</sup> ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA, "The Process Behind PlaNYC: How the City of New York Developed Its Comprehensive Long-Term Sustainability Plan," *ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA*, April 2010, [http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/planyc2030/pdf/iclei\\_planyc\\_case\\_study\\_201004.pdf](http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/planyc2030/pdf/iclei_planyc_case_study_201004.pdf).

mitigate the impact of future storms and floods.<sup>53</sup> Other democratic leaders echoed Bloomberg's framing of Sandy in public statements. For example, New York City Governor Andrew Cuomo, argued "anyone who says there is not a dramatic change in weather patterns... is denying reality." The state's Senator Charles Schumer stated "We're going to pay a price for the change in climate," while Congressional Representative of Manhattan Jerrold Nadler stated, "There will be a storm of this magnitude again."<sup>54</sup> In contrast, Republican Representative of Long Island Peter King denied the existence of climate change, and framed the storm as merely a technocratic emergency. He used his public attention to shame his fellow Republicans who blocked and delayed emergency congressional funding for post-Sandy recovery and "real life and death" situations.<sup>55</sup>

Bloomberg's attempt to make Sandy about climate change was timed with the looming presidential election. Climate change had been largely absent from the 2012 campaign, never appearing in any of the presidential debates, and neither candidate had

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<sup>53</sup> Cynthia Rosenzweig and William Solecki, "Hurricane Sandy and adaption pathways in New York: Lessons from a first-responder city," *Global Environmental Change*, 28, (2014): 395-408. Thus far that effort has culminated in a lot of planning, but very little building: as of this writing in May of 2019, they have only constructed a ring of large sandbags around lower Manhattan. On this planning, see Jeff Goodell, "Can New York be Saved in the Era of Global Warming?" *Rolling Stone*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/can-new-york-be-saved-in-the-era-of-global-warming-240454/>. On the delays of this construction in Brooklyn, see Brett Yates, "When will Red Hook get its Flood Protection?" *Star Revue*, October 12, 2018. On the recent building of sand-bags in Manhattan, see Patrick McGeehan, "6 Years After Hurricane Sandy, Here's What They Came Up With: Really Big Sandbags," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Raymond Hernandez, "Bloomberg Backs Obama, Citing Fallout from Storm," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/02/nyregion/bloomberg-endorses-obama-saying-hurricane-sandy-affected-decision.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Peter King, "Representatives Peter King and Frank Pallone on Hurricane Sandy Relief Funding," *C-Span*, January 2, 2013, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?310181-6/representatives-peter-king-frank-pallone-hurricane-sandy-relief-funding>.



proposed any detailed legislative or regulatory agenda on the issue.<sup>56</sup> Yet after Sandy, Mayor Bloomberg, dubbed by *The New Yorker* as, “the nation’s most prominent high-information swing voter,” attempted to make Sandy into an event that would generate sustained policy reform toward climate change adaptation on a national level. He had been previously critical of both Obama and Romney and refused to back either in the election. But after Sandy he reversed course and gave Obama his public endorsement.<sup>57</sup> Explaining his reasoning, he pointed to Sandy and cited Obama’s record on attempting to reduce carbon emissions: “Our climate is changing. And while the increase in extreme weather we have experience in New York City and around the world may or may not be the result of it, the risk that it may be—given the devastation it is wreaking—should be enough to compel all elected leaders to take immediate action.”<sup>58</sup> Obama quickly issued a statement thanking Bloomberg for his endorsement, reiterating that, “climate change is a threat to our children’s future, and we owe it to them to do something about it... he has my continued commitment that this country will stand by New York in its time of need. And New Yorkers have my word that we will recover, we will rebuild, and we will come back stronger.”<sup>59</sup> Like Bush after Katrina, Obama was responding to the public created by the disaster, adopting the framings circulated by powerful public figures.

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<sup>56</sup> Hernandez, “Bloomberg Backs Obama.”

<sup>57</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, “Into the Storm,” *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/11/12/into-the-storm>.

<sup>58</sup> Crystal Gammon, “Will Sandy Change the Climate Change Conversation?” *CBS News*, November 2, 2012, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/will-sandy-change-the-climate-change-conversation/>.

<sup>59</sup> Obama/Biden Campaign, “Statement from President Obama on Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Endorsement,” November 1, 2012, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/11/02/nyregion/02obama-on-Bloomberg-endorse.html>.

In contrast to Obama's gains, *The New York Times* and other major outlets used the spectacle to lambast Romney's calls for using neoliberal reforms to whittle down the responsibilities of government even further, applying a "small-government" approach to even national emergencies. They drew attention to statements he made the year prior in support of dismantling the federal emergency response system, and handing it over to state, or better, private companies. Journalists pressed Romney to elaborate on that position in the media spotlight after Sandy. Seeing the political costs of standing against "big government" in the moment of a national emergency, he refused to comment.<sup>60</sup> For these reasons, many public commentators and some social scientists have argued that Hurricane Sandy helped increase Obama's popularity immediately before the election; though not likely in swing-states where it would have mattered to the election outcome.<sup>61</sup>

Bloomberg's use of Sandy appears to have had a lasting influence on Obama's platform. Upon re-election, Obama used his second inaugural address to point to Sandy and other storms as a sign that climate change is an urgent problem that America must take on:

We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations. Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but

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<sup>60</sup> New York Times Editorial Page, "A Big Storm Requires Big Government," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2012, [https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/30/opinion/a-big-storm-requires-big-government.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/30/opinion/a-big-storm-requires-big-government.html?_r=0).

<sup>61</sup> For example, see Yamil Velez and David Martin, "Sandy the Rainmaker: The Electoral Impact of a Super Storm," *Political Science & Politics*, 46, no. 2, (2013): 313-323.

none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires and crippling drought and more powerful storms.<sup>62</sup>

It is worth noting that in contrast to other, grassroots attempts to make Sandy about climate change that I examine below, the Obama platform on the matter was an endorsement of technocratic power combined with market relations.<sup>63</sup> He made efforts to legitimize this move in public speeches, introducing his “Climate Action Plan” in the language of emergency. In one speech, he cited Hurricane Sandy as an example of how normal storms are being made more powerful by accelerated climate change, as well as Midwest droughts and floods, and wildfires in the western states. He emphasized that these are problems being created by human activity, and are thus in need of a “coordinated assault on a changing climate.” He then went on to emphasize that the assault is not against industry, that it will not harm the economic system, but that these new regulations are actually “an engine for growth,” citing companies like GM, Nike, and Walmart who have voluntarily invested in renewable energy.<sup>64</sup>

At the grassroots level, Sandy was also taken as an opportunity for social and political change, albeit in a different way. Some of the same evangelical organizations that mobilized after Katrina showed up to Sandy’s disaster zone to provide aid, and in some cases, to simultaneously promote Christian piety. Included in this movement was Jerry Davis, the “disaster pastor” who organized one of the larger evangelical volunteer

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<sup>62</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address by President Obama,” *The White House*, January 21, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

<sup>63</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Climate Change,” *The White House*, June 25, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/25/remarks-president-climate-change>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

relief projects during Katrina. Just as he saw the disaster as an opportunity to reorient America to goals beyond safety and the status-quo, so too was Sandy such a blessing. Here is how he describes the need for saving souls in light of the disaster: “New York City and New Jersey are densely populated areas, with NYC being America’s largest city and perhaps the most in need of salvation of all... God’s word tells us in Hosea 5:15, ‘in their affliction, they will seek me early.’” He goes on to describe the proper division of labor between “secular” and Christian agencies, on account of what he sees as the narrow, “humanitarian” goals of FEMA and the Red Cross:

FEMA, Red Cross, and other secular organizations are usually capable of bringing humanitarian aid. They are NOT capable of delivering it with true compassion. That takes Christians. The secular world is also not capable of delivering the Gospel. But God never asked them to. That is the responsibility of the CHURCH at large.

He goes on to insist that disaster recovery expand its goals beyond achieving safety and a return to normal:

One hundred years from now EVERYONE we help will be dead. All of the buildings we restore will be gone. The Church of Jesus Christ MUST leverage our desire to be humanitarians with our commission to be soul savers... The great command from Jesus to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ must go hand in hand with the great commission from Christ to ‘Go make disciples.’<sup>65</sup>

More than just repair damage for lives and property that will wither eventually, he insists that disaster response needs to address bigger matters, delivering God’s message to the nation and saving the souls of disaster victims.

Social justice activists also mobilized to dually provide disaster aid and to use the media’s attention to their work as an opportunity to reshape public understandings

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<sup>65</sup> “Hurricane Harvey – 2017 – Southeast Texas – Aftermath” Jerry Davis – Disaster Pastor Network, <http://disasterpastor.net/latest-news>.

of the disaster. Like the framing of the Democratic leadership after Sandy, a group of activists in New York City and New Jersey were intent on channeling the public discussion toward climate change, but with an emphasis on the social justice and capitalism. “Occupy Sandy” was an organization created by former participants in the then-defunct Occupy Wall Street movement. When Sandy hit, they tapped their activist networks to organize relief and recovery projects in the streets, and were subsequently populated by thousands of new individuals who were looking for a venue to help those affected by the storm.<sup>66</sup> Sandy participants utilized the publicity of their success in providing emergency relief, rendering Hurricane Sandy as the sign of a larger crisis.

According to Occupy Sandy, the hurricane’s destruction was rooted in capitalism. Climate change, as well as pre-existing poverty, state neglect, inattentive bureaucracies, and the capture of state power by “the 1%” characterized the underlying problem. Like the activists of New Orleans, they insisted that the disaster merely crystalized underlying injustices and dangers in American society. In this rendering, much more radical action was necessary than empowering an environmentally enlightened group of technocrats, harnessing market forces, and building better infrastructure, as Bloomberg and Obama were pursuing.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, the proper response to Sandy required seizing power from the state or the 1%, and empowering “the people” or “the 99%.”

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<sup>66</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the formation and goals of Occupy Sandy, see Tyler Schuenemann, “Making and Scheduling Citizens: Political time and the Democratic Potential of Hurricanes,” *New Political Science*, 42, no. 1 (2020): 87-108.

<sup>67</sup> Prior to Sandy, the Obama administration made what environmentalist groups argued was a half-hearted attempt at such reform in his 2009 cap-and-trade legislation, which governed climate change by creating a market for CO2 emissions to be monitored by experts. This died in the Senate with little White House backing. The Obama administration returned to the issue after his re-election, issuing a series of

Occupy Sandy utilized the popular attention to the post-Sandy recovery efforts to inject this story of antagonistic struggle against injustice, abandonment, and exploitation. In contrast to the nationalist rhetoric of the Democratic leadership, emphasizing the need for unity, aid, and mourning in the face of collective suffering, Occupy Sandy participants invoked an oppositional, populist category of political identity—one in struggle with an opponent. This rhetoric is captured in an advertisement for a weekend-long meeting of participants for organizing future goals within the group: “We [Occupy Sandy participants] came together and showed that a Peoples Recovery- by, for and of the 99% - is not only possible, it's already happening. Now it's time to organize that Peoples Recovery together. Will you join us in the effort and help rally your community for a better NYC?”<sup>68</sup> Note the conflation of the “People” and “the 99%.” These framings demonstrate that participants were politicizing recovery, making it a story about the exclusion of the “the People” or “the 99%” from political power at the hands of “the 1%.”<sup>69</sup> They described recovery as a problem of inequality, and highlight the competing interests hidden within conventional approaches to recovery, wherein the goal is to

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executive orders referred to as his “Climate Action Plan.” He made efforts to popularize this move in public speeches, introducing his new policy strategy by making references to Hurricane Sandy, citing it as an example of how normal storms are being made more powerful by accelerated climate change, as well as Midwest droughts and floods, and wildfires in the western states. See Obama, “Remarks by the President on Climate Change.”

<sup>68</sup> Emphasis in the original. Mass email from Peoples Recovery Summit Planning Committee; for “top-down” metaphor, see Damien Crisp, “Hurricane Sandy: Top Down Relief,” accessed February 17, 2013, <http://summit.peoplesrecovery.org/#section-n1>.

<sup>69</sup> For example, in her online journalism, one Occupy Sandy participant describes her experience by foregrounding inequality. She contrasts the media's attention to people reviving their smart phones at charging stations in lower Manhattan with her own experience in trying to deliver insulin to elderly and disabled people trapped in their apartments in poor and working-class neighborhoods isolated by the hurricane. See Jillian Buckely, “Occupy Sandy Provides Relief for More Than Just a Storm,” *Yes Magazine*, December 13, 2012.

“bounce-back” to the status-quo. It is for this reason that journalists and activists from New Orleans were given a forum at the meeting to share their accounts of the racist and classist character of post-Katrina recovery, and warn of things to come post-Sandy, least they organize to stop it. Occupy Sandy participants drew from the Katrina example, as well as Naomi Klein’s popular book about “disaster capitalism,” to legitimize an antagonistic reading of disasters.<sup>70</sup>

We’re well aware that disasters are often opportunities for the government to take valuable land, or rebuild on land that they see as valuable in some way. That benefits people with the big bucks, but not the people living on the ground... Part of our work is building strong communities and networks with the knowledge that there might be a fight coming towards us. We believe in community empowered rebuilding efforts – that the community living on the ground should have a say in what happens to their communities.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, Occupy Sandy participants began training disaster victims in the tactics of holding sit-ins in anticipation of government agencies refusing to allow people to continue living in flood zones on the shore.<sup>72</sup>

In this subversion of the Democratic leadership’s framing, in which Sandy is an embodiment of climate change, disaster recovery is not a story of American citizens being struck by calamity and helped back to their feet by an attentive, administrative state or public-private partnerships. Recovery is a struggle over who gets what, and who gets

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<sup>70</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. (New York City, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

<sup>71</sup> Ed Rampell, “Occupy Sandy: Volunteers for America’s 99%: The Cavalry is Us,” *Rock Cellar Magazine*, January 2013. <http://www.rockcellarmagazine.com/2013/01/07/occupy-sandy-volunteers-for-americas-99/>.

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Maslin Nir, “Storm Effort Causes Rift in a Shifting Occupy Movement,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/01/nyregion/occupy-movements-changing-focus-causes-rift.html>.

to define the goals of recovery. Occupy Sandy's framing renders recovery a realm where a new actor appears, "the people," as a counter to the authority of the technocrats, e.g. FEMA and the Red Cross, and "the 1%," e.g. slum lords and insurance companies. This meant that the decision-making process for responding to the disaster was not premised upon the authority of technocratic knowledge and its conventions for responding to emergencies, but upon deliberation among the people being affected by the crisis. Occupy Sandy was calling upon powerful recovery organizations to justify their actions to a newly attentive public. Pushing against what some see as the conservative teleology of disaster management institutions—that disasters are a break from the normal, and thus the proper response is returning to the status-quo—Occupy Sandy insisted that the goals of recovery be a matter of democratic decision-making.<sup>73</sup> The teleology of the "recovery" agenda was rejected as anti-democratic.

Occupy Sandy participants focused on opening for debate what elements of the pre-Sandy status-quo were worth retrieving, and what was in need of change. Even behind closed doors, they practiced this goal in their meetings. For example, in a group discussion at one of their meetings, one person who described their work as "recovery" immediately rejected the term's implications. He corrected himself for using it: "Occupy Sandy is about making things better than they were, not recovering back to the poverty that was there pre- [Hurricane] Sandy." Others in the same discussion echoed these sentiments in stating that the hurricane "exposed the wounds of poverty" that were there

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<sup>73</sup> Kenneth Hewitt, "The idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age," in *Interpretations of Calamity: From the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, Kenneth Hewitt ed., (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 3-32.



prior.<sup>74</sup> In their eyes, only parts of the previous status-quo were deemed worthy of restoration, including housing, schools, and re-opening businesses. And even these were objects to be radically re-thought for the sake of combating climate change and creating more “resilient” communities for the next major hurricane.<sup>75</sup> Still others argued that the hurricane was only one of several disasters that needed to be addressed in a People’s Recovery: “there’s the initial disaster, and then there’s the long-term disaster that happens after the... volunteers leave, after the cameras leave, that is deeply related to the failures and ongoing crisis of capitalism as a system.”<sup>76</sup> Other participants spoke of “the slow hurricanes of poverty, unemployment, poor education and lack of access to healthcare...” that existed long before Sandy, which merely “accentuated the destruction wrought by these continuous crises.”<sup>77</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how humanitarian efforts after recent hurricanes in the US were not divorced from struggles over political power. Large-scale hurricanes are now being treated as unplanned political spectacles in the US, in contrast to those earlier disasters considered in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Constituted by the discursive

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<sup>74</sup> Author’s field notes at “People’s Recovery Summit,” February 1, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Premo interviewed by Liam Barrington-Bush, “Occupy Sandy operationalised Occupy Wall Street,” More Like People, <http://morelikepeople.org/michaelpremo-interview/>.

<sup>77</sup> This language is from the website of the Worker-Owned Rockaway Cooperatives, an off-shoot of Occupy Sandy designed to incubate worker-owned cooperatives in the aftermath of Sandy, which was modeled after those organized in Argentina after its financial crisis in 2003. “Occupy Sandy,” <http://occupysandy.net/?projects=worker-owned-rockaway-cooperatives-w-o-r-cs>.

framework of national emergency and an expanded vision for state responsibility for its citizens, the spectacle is that of a sudden, urgent threat to people's capacity to enjoy the fruits of American citizenship, namely security and welfare in the face of ecological threats. Officials and dissidents compete to use this spectacle for their own interests, framing it with larger political meaning for the public to consider.

The public trial of authorities is perhaps the most prominent form that these political spectacles take, wherein officials are judged based on their ability to perform as competent technocrats that respond quickly and effectively to the emergency. Hence, the Bush and Obama administrations made speeches and appearances for a national, public audience to defend themselves against charges of negligence or ineptitude. They also told a story that rendered the quest for technocratic management as being beside the point. Emphasizing the tragic, overwhelming nature of the problem, they made a show out of giving official recognition to the suffering of victims; and they muddled the distinctions between official and unofficial aid projects, portraying them as an embodiment of a more abstract "nation" facing insurmountable forces, as opposed to technocrats managing nature for the sake of civilians.

But dissidents did more than demand better, perhaps greener technocrats in office to help recover the status-quo. Evangelicals used the spectacle as an opportunity to direct public values away from what they saw as fleeting material concerns over safety and welfare, in hopes of spreading Christian piety. Social justice advocates used the spectacle to draw attention to those forces beyond the hurricane that also undermine the social contract, such as systemic racism, urban neglect, and capitalism. In doing so, they attempted to force the "recovery" agenda to address the issue of pre- and post-disaster

inequalities. Occupy Sandy went so far as to call for democratic control of the recovery agenda. In their vision, the very notion of recovery should be defined through more inclusive, democratic mechanisms, as opposed to experts working behind closed doors.

These contests to anchor the spectacle to a larger political message show that recent disaster contention in the US is not built on social facts, but competing social imaginaries. It is not the severity of humanitarian need and the efficiency with which it is met by the state or civil society actors that drives the contention. Indeed, much of the political activity surrounding disasters centers on trying to shape what gets taken as fact by the public, and what values should be used to judge those facts, whether it is public safety, national solidarity, Christian piety, or social justice. In this way, disasters have become another arena in which officials and dissidents wield symbolic power to shape how people understand their citizenship. These contests over public meaning-making and the discursive frameworks that shape them are central to understanding the kinds of politics that such disasters impel in the US today.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **CYCLONE GONU AS AN UNPLANNED POLITICAL SPECTACLE IN OMAN**

While the contestation that I documented in the case of recent, large-scale hurricanes in the US might call into question the inherent, anti-democratic danger of disasters, a scholar of social movements in the United States might not be surprised by my findings. One can imagine them stating that, of course, in a divided society with a long history of social movement activism, hurricanes are going to generate contention like every other major event. In this rendering, the hurricane might as well be an election, a school shooting, a terrorist attack, and any other event that generates public attention on matters of politics. That is, ecological disasters are merely avenues for pre-existing struggles, or expressions of the “social contract.”<sup>1</sup>

But such a quick conclusion misses surprising similarities to other countries. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, there are similar forms of contention pushing to the surface in Oman, where such a history of civic activism and partisanship is largely absent. This contention is evident in the responses to cyclone Gonu, a powerful tropical

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<sup>1</sup> For scholars who take the latter position, see Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill, “Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes,” *Progress in Human Geography*, (May, 2009): 1-17.

cyclone that slammed into Omani coastline in 2007. In the language of meteorology, it was a “Category 5,” or “Super Cyclonic Storm” by virtue of its Gale winds reaching 145 miles per hour. Omanis themselves described how, “the entire land [became] sea,”<sup>2</sup> as Gonu’s storm surge brought the ocean inland, and flash floods washed away highways, bridges, orchards, and neighborhoods. Residents described snakes and feral street animals moving into their houses to seek shelter from the rising waters. As the flood waters subsequently receded, human corpses became visible within the strewn debris. The storm instigated a marathon of hardship after it knocked out electricity and running water throughout much of the capital and its surrounding suburbs for several days, when the summer temperatures exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The total estimated cost of the storm’s damage is four billion US dollars.<sup>3</sup>

The public, visible character of this devastation provided Omanis with a shared sense that they had just experienced an event of major destruction to their public goods and private lives—a national calamity in Oman that was unlike any previous event. But interpretations varied widely regarding what this modern destruction meant. These disagreements provoked a political competition that trespassed the confines of official and self-censorship which normally temper public discourse in Oman.

Dissidents and officials treated Gonu as an unplanned political spectacle. They competed in framing contests to anchor the images of destruction and aid to a narrative

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<sup>2</sup> Mariam al Faraji, “a05dag001,” Interview by Mazin al Balushi, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann. Unless otherwise noted, Noora al-Balushi led the translation of all materials cited here.

<sup>3</sup> Juma al-Maskari, “How the National Forecasting Centre in Oman Dealt with Tropical Cyclone Gonu,” in *Indian Ocean Cyclones and Climate Change*, Yassine Charabi ed., (New York City, NY: Springer, 2010), 265.

that provided larger lessons about social and political bonds: Is the destruction simply an inevitable hazard of living on the coast? Or is it a symptom of some kind of moral or political failing on behalf of the Omanis? Perhaps it is evidence of bad urban planning and government corruption, requiring a more rational, technocratic government. Others insisted that it is a sign of God's disapproval, a form of collective punishment for Oman's modernization and abandonment of Islamic principles in daily life and government. These and similar considerations emerged in the face of the cyclone's vast destruction.

In this chapter, I draw from my ethnographic field work, semi-structured interviews, and archival research to document how Gonu was politicized in ways that are surprisingly similar to that of Katrina and Sandy in the US. To be clear, the extent of the contention that emerged in the aftermath of Gonu is much more subdued than seen after Katrina and Sandy in the US. But as I show below, in both countries we see that tropical cyclones have the capacity to generate similar public grievances regarding the success and value of technocratic government, as well as deeper questions about the meaning of national membership. Moreover, like in the US, political entrepreneurs step onto the public stage in a contest to mobilize a larger constituency behind their platforms, creating framing contests between dissidents and officials. In these contests, political entrepreneurs are using the spectacle of the disaster to shape the values through which the public can attempt to hold the state accountable. In response, as in the US, state representatives in Oman make interventions into the public sphere as to the "real meaning" of the disaster.

This battle makes visible for analysis a consequential arena of political struggle that is largely ignored by contemporary scholarship on Omani politics. The Omani

regime is not merely distributing “rent” to buy the acquiescence of a population that is willing to disengage from politics in exchange for material prosperity, as the rentier model would have it.<sup>4</sup> Under that model, rentier states like Oman are threatened by economic crashes, falling oil prices, or political extremism that may undermine their ability to satisfy their citizens’ raised expectations for state services and employment that sustain a new lifestyle of leisure and political acquiescence. The response to Cyclone Gonu shows a different field of politics. That is, Gonu makes visible how the Omani regime, like the US government, attempts to consolidate “symbolic power” by monopolizing the terms and narratives through which citizens make sense of their shared fate in the aftermath of tropical cyclones.<sup>5</sup> I find that Omani citizens are hungry for ways to publicly display their national solidarity, and willingness to contribute to a larger good, and to do so in accordance with their religious and civic values. The Omani state is thus deeply invested in more than just providing material security to its citizens in exchange for acquiescence. It goes to great efforts to shape how citizens understand the common good, how they act upon it in public, and the extent to which everyday citizens look to the government in order to achieve it. As I show below, the public processes of assigning meaning to tropical cyclones are becoming sites for such a struggle of state domination.

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, (New York City, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999); Peterson, *Oman’s Insurgencies*; and Valeri, *Oman*. For an updated account of this feature of Rentierism in the Gulf, see Matthew Gray, “A Theory of Late Rentierism in the Arab States of the Gulf,” Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Center for International and Regional Studies, Occasional Paper, no. 7, (2011). For a recent example of this thinking applied to Oman specifically, see Hunt, “The Late Unpleasantness.”

<sup>5</sup> On symbolic power as a tool of Middle Eastern regimes, see Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*; and Lisa Wedeen, “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes on Syria,” *Critical Inquiry*, 39, no. 4, (2013): 841-873.

Moreover, my analysis illuminates how the tangible embodiments of climate change reinforce already existing, often contested notions of authority and responsibility. Extending previous scholarship on how “the social contract” shapes disaster response,<sup>6</sup> I find that such responses are not determined by some singular, abstract, pre-existing “social contract” that defines the rights and responsibilities of the state and citizens. Rather, the response is the outcome of a struggle between partisans of *multiple*, and sometimes competing understandings of what states are capable of and responsible for, and a popular but politically ambivalent desire by civilians to participate in doing good. Moreover, these notions of citizenship are not limited to a contractual logic wherein Omani citizens expect certain rights and duties. They also include popular aspirations, shared dreams of collective achievement where surprising accomplishments are also meaningful ways of defining political membership.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section examines the events of Gonu as they emerged in a country where public speech is carefully policed, creating a culture in which expressions of dissent are risky, and as a consequence, Omanis are left to speculate as to the concerns and opinions of their fellow citizens in regards to most political issues. The second section examines one of two dissident framings of Gonu, which emerged in public and semi-public forums. This framing focused on the notion that the state failed to fulfill its obligation to apply expert knowledge to mitigate the effects of such storms upon the lives of Omanis. The third section examines another prominent and critical framing. It tells the story of the purportedly divine origins of the

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<sup>6</sup> Pelling and Dill, “Disaster Politics,” 3.



disaster as a punishment for the standing regime's reforms over the past decades. The fourth section examines how the state understood such framings as requiring a response, wherein state officials and the Sultan himself stepped in to spin the meaning of Gonu into a story of national triumph, drawing upon both the values of successful recovery efforts and Islamic piety that were championed by the dissident narratives.

### **Gonu in Context**

Cyclone Gonu was first recognized by the Indian Meteorology Department on June 2, 2007 as the low-pressure system appeared southwest of Mumbai the previous day. This triggered a meeting among Oman's various ministries, chaired by the Chief Inspector of Oman Police, as the body of the Executive Office of the National Committee for Civil Defense (NCCD) that same day. The first public announcement about the storm was released the following day, and on June 4<sup>th</sup>, a state of emergency was declared by the Chairman of the NCCD.<sup>7</sup> This declaration put all civil and military institutions under the control of the NCCD. 20,000 inhabitants of Masirah Island were evacuated on June 5<sup>th</sup>, and ports and coastal oil terminals shut down in anticipation of the storm. The Omani government declared a five-day national holiday beginning June 5<sup>th</sup>, using state television to broadcast satellite images with a map of Oman's coast with a florescent swirl moving toward it. It also used radio and text messages in Arabic and English to issue warnings to the population.<sup>8</sup> The Omani state was pre-emptively treating the storm as a national

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter three, Article three of the Omani *Civil Defense Law*.

<sup>8</sup> This timeline is from al-Maskari, "How the National Forecasting Centre in Oman Dealt with Tropical Cyclone Gonu," 267-269.

emergency of a technocratic nature, requiring quick, effective, top-down solutions to the impending humanitarian problems that the natural disaster would bring.

As the storm hit the newly urbanized coastline, both the Omani media and everyday citizens armed with smartphones created a flurry of formal and informal journalism. Images, videos, and accounts were circulated in the official media outlets, as well as on social media and copied CD-ROMs. Through the newspapers, radio, TV, blogs, social media, internet forums, and mosque sermons, stories of the event dominated for months. In these accounts, the spectacle of destruction, suffering, and recovery efforts created a clear sense of emergency, but also impelled a great deal of public and semi-public discourse about the larger meaning of the event. These various interpretations of Gonu as more than just a humanitarian emergency showcase a field of symbolic power with significant political stakes.

Before analyzing this field, a brief analysis of the context is necessary for understanding the rules, norms, and institutions that shape the circulation of ideas in public and private spaces. In short, these diverging accounts of Gonu were created in a context of long-held official and unofficial controls over an emerging public sphere in Oman. Like other countries in the Middle East,<sup>9</sup> Oman has seen the emergence of spheres of communication wherein everyday citizens, not just the elite, can comment upon and try to shape issues of the common good, most notably around political

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<sup>9</sup> On this phenomenon in Muslim-majority countries, see Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman ed., *Public Islam and the Common Good*, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2004), xi; and Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine ed., *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies*, (New York City, NY: Palgrave, 2005).

institutions and Islamic values. But these spheres of communication are highly restrictive.

On paper, Omanis have individual rights for freedom of speech, with some notable exceptions: for example, it is illegal to insult the Sultan or religion, and liable laws make “naming-names” in one’s dissent especially risky.<sup>10</sup> In practice, the government gives little credence to these already truncated rights. For example, several Omanis have been imprisoned or threatened with imprisonment for writing posts on Facebook which commented on the Omani civil war in the 1970s, neither of which commented on the Sultan, religion, or criticized specific individuals.<sup>11</sup>

Outside of the weak individual protection of civil rights, the Omani state also exercises a great deal of power over the media. The government maintains direct control over key television and newspaper outlets in the country. Meanwhile, private media companies exercise a kind of dance between self-censorship and pushing against red-lines for what the government will tolerate in print.<sup>12</sup> For example, one Omani journalist was imprisoned for publishing accounts of individual corruption in the judiciary, including heads of the Supreme Court and Ishaq al-Busaidi, vice-chairman of the Higher Judicial Council. When a colleague of the journalist spoke out against the imprisonment,

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<sup>10</sup> Most forms of government censorship were officially abolished in 1985, but remain in practice today. For more details, see Valeri, *Oman*, 124-127.

<sup>11</sup> The Omani Center for Human Rights, “The Human Rights Situation in Oman: Annual Report 2016.” March 28, 2017, <https://ochroman.org/eng/2016-2/>.

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Information can strip individual journalist of their licenses to practice if they publish controversial material. Moreover, papers that continuously push the boundaries of public discourse can be shut down, and their contributors imprisoned. This was the fate of several independent Omani publications in 2016, including *al Balad*, *Mowatin*, and *Azamn*. Interview with Author, March 8, 2016. See also The Omani Center for Human Rights, “The Human Rights Situation in Oman.”

he too was imprisoned and the Ministry of Information closed the paper. Two other papers were closed down that same year for publishing material that was critical of, or embarrassing to the government.<sup>13</sup>

A similar movement between self-censorship and pushing the boundaries of acceptable public speech occurs among Omani citizens, as they make use of blogs and social media to document and comment on current events in Oman. When an Omani publishes controversial material online, they might receive “the phone call” from government minders, be brought in for interrogation, or even imprisoned, depending on the seriousness of their case. They can also be harassed and publicly shamed by civilians, as well as Omani officials.<sup>14</sup> The effect of these restrictions has been to shape what Omanis will say in public and how they say it.

But more importantly, these restrictions fragment Omani citizens into pockets of semi-public discussion and news-sharing. Alternative news and discussion venues have proliferated wherein Omanis can discuss important issues of current events, history, religion, and circulate rumors. Internet discussion forums where Omanis can post material anonymously have become key venues in which Omanis discuss what the established press is unwilling or unable to cover. Less anonymous, and therefore less critical, are blogs along with their comment threads. Although Twitter, Whatsapp, and Facebook are popular venues for such discussion today, this development occurred years after GONU.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Author, March 8, 2016.

In these venues, the lines between facts and rumors of current events are difficult to establish, because there is no authoritative source to appeal to. Journalists occasionally do publish work that is seen as both factual and politically relevant. But given the rarity of such a phenomenon, some Omanis have made it a practice to take screen-shots of any online news that appears controversial, and share it on the online forums. The presumption here is that the material will likely be removed from official circulation, and so it is up to them to preserve it for circulation in these alternative communication channels. But without journalists capable of regularly vetting the veracity of claims, readers are left to their own to speculate, except, or reject other people's accounts. It is a sphere of punditry, though without publically available facts to comment upon. The effect of this fragmentation is that it makes it very difficult for a watchful Omani citizen to know with any certainty what is happening in their country, or what their fellow citizens outside of their own social networks are really thinking.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of clear and prominent alternative accounts of Omani politics and society, this censorship and fragmentation allows official stories to dominate public discussion, and shape much of foreign journalism, even some academic scholarship on the country.<sup>16</sup> It is why the image of Oman as an apolitical, "sleepy Sultanate," has been able to proliferate, despite the fact that the country had two civil wars in the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Author, February 16, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> A version of orientalism in Western journalism on Oman has proliferated in this environment, which tries to explain that apparent tranquility of the country on account of the specific version of Islam, *Ibadism*, found in the country. The idea is that there is something about the doctrine of Ibadism that leads to political moderation and tolerance of other religions. The Omani Ministry of Religious Affairs is partially responsible for articulating and spreading this message through its educational campaigns in the country and abroad.

<sup>17</sup> The Jebel Akhdar War occurred from 1954 to 1959, the Dhofar Rebellion from 1963 to 1976.

This fragmented and politically risky character of the Omani public and semi-public spheres shaped how, and in what venues Omanis were able to circulate and evaluate competing framings of the Gonu spectacle. Drawing from interviews and archival research of this cultural production, I have found that, although Omanis were understandably cautious with how, and in which venues they politicized Gonu, there was considerable dissent, and even attempts to make this dissent in public forums. In the analysis that follows, I document simultaneous ways in which public suspicion about the meaning of Gonu formed into two different political framings against which the Omani state had to respond. The first construed Gonu as a technical, predictable problem to be managed, calling into question who was responsible for such management (some combination of administration and private initiatives), and whether they had failed or succeeded in this case. The second construed Gonu as a surprising event for which no one could be held responsible. Here, the question is not of responsibility, but of what the destruction revealed about the true character of the nation. In both cases, the legitimacy of the Sultan's regime was brought under public scrutiny to such an extent that the regime actively intervened, joining in the framing contest.

### **Gonu as a Technical Challenge for Government**

The official and private media coverage of Gonu's impact, as well as the subsequent books and magazines that attempted to provide official histories of the events, predominately render the event as a cause for celebration. In this version, the event was construed as a technical problem, involving flooded homes and streets, destroyed bridges, and a quick and successful response from both state agencies and Omani volunteers. In

this sense, Gonu was being framed as a large-scale accident that was being properly addressed by rational organization and technology—signaling the success of Oman’s recent decades of development.

Critics similarly portrayed Gonu as a technical problem, but offered a different conclusion. The images of destruction circulated in the media contained a common visual language of Oman’s modern achievements being destroyed. This included photos and videos of people standing amongst shattered coastal highways, modern shopping centers under water, piles of hundreds of buried and over-turned luxury cars, videos of Omanis trapped in their SUVs, stranded in gushing torrents as onlookers helplessly watched from the water’s edge. Perhaps the most famous image of the event is that of the flood waters engulfing the well-known McDonalds in the posh neighborhood of Qurum, with the water lapping at the feet of the golden arches symbol.<sup>18</sup> Conspicuously absent were images of destroyed labor camps where migrant south-Asian workers lived, and of washed-out rural and agricultural areas outside of the capital.<sup>19</sup> This visual pattern both represented and circulated a very specific preoccupation in the storm’s destruction, as it focused on the markers of Oman’s modern prosperity. It was as if the fruits of Omani development were being washed away.

Critics concluded from these images that Gonu showed that Oman was being governed by an incompetent or corrupt managerial class, unable or uninterested in

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<sup>18</sup> In my fieldwork in 2014-2016, people regularly mentioned the destruction of this specific McDonalds to indicate the extent of the flooding after Gonu.

<sup>19</sup> Images of this destruction on the periphery of Muscat was later used in a journalistic expose of the government’s neglect of the coastal town of Qurayyat.

ensuring public health and safety for all Omanis. Some newspapers published accounts that fed this image of government failure, despite their practices of self-censorship.<sup>20</sup> For example, a news was entitled, “The streets of Qurayyat cry out since the climatic event (*anwa*) of June 2007.”<sup>21</sup> The article showed that one of the hardest hit coastal towns outside of the capital still had not had its infrastructure repaired several months after the storm, long after the recovery period was officially declared over. The language of the article was dramatic, showcasing how people outside of the capital had been abandoned. It states that the streets and the people of Qurayyat were still “crying out” several months after the storm. The word for “crying” here, *tastaghaith*, is politically charged in Omani discourse, as it is used for describing pleas from the most desperate. For example, Omanis would use the term to describe the “crying” of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, and that of the Syrian people in 2011.<sup>22</sup> The article was eventually removed from circulation and the paper’s publically available archives. But one reader took screenshots of it and circulated them on a popular Omani discussion forum.<sup>23</sup>

This narrative of Gonu as an episode of managerial failure was also documented by an oral history project that was conducted by the Omani Research Center at Sultan

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Author, May 6, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> The meaning of *anwa* and how to translate it is contested, as I describe in a subsequent section below.

<sup>22</sup> I am thankful to an anonymous Omani for highlighting the political significance of this word choice. Author’s Field notes, July 7, 2016. For an example of Omanis using “*tastaghaith*” to describe Syrians in 2011, see “Oman Youth Campaign for Syria Relief [Levant Cries Out [*tastaghaith*],” *Sabla ‘uman*, 2011, <http://avb.s-oman.net/archive/index.php/t-1566415.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Discussion of the article, as well as a screen-shot of it, can be viewed at this Omani discussion forum: “shoar’ qurayyat tastaghaith [The Streets of Qurayyat Cry Out],” *Sabla ‘man*, October 5, 2007, <http://avb.s-oman.net/showthread.php?t=1145845>.



Qaboos University. For this project, Omani university students went to the areas affected by the cyclone and collected approximately fifty interviews. Conducted two months after the storm, they provide a window into how Omanis were reflecting upon the storm with the hindsight of the aid and recovery efforts. These transcripts went uncensored by the Omani Ministry of Information, likely because they were archived and never published. While several of the transcripts show a reluctance on behalf of the interviewee to be candid with the researchers, they nevertheless express views that trespass the boundaries of public speech.

The transcripts reveal that Omanis were divided and often ambivalent on the performance of the state emergency institutions, as well as of others who participated in the early warning, relief, and recovery efforts. While many Omanis expressed gratitude and pride in their descriptions of the government's response to the disaster, many Omanis also resented the police, military, and weathermen for not doing enough, especially in regards to warning those living inland. "Do you know who did not do their job well? The police... [they] evacuated some areas and left the others. The police did not do their job."<sup>24</sup> The Omani meteorologists were also blamed by those living inland who lost their homes. While the police drove around to warn people in coastal villages about the incoming storm, and the Omani meteorologists did the same on TV, they appear to have neglected to tell those who lived in flashflood areas away from the coast: "When [the weathermen on TV] told us it [Gonu] is coming, they didn't tell us that it's coming from

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<sup>24</sup> Zakyia al Battshi, "a07dag001," Interview by Asma al Baluchi, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann.

this side [inland], they said it's coming from the sea, from the coast... and the people from the coast were actually brought here [inland] to stay with us.”<sup>25</sup> Another Omani expressed his frustration with the same problem: “...Everyone was warning us about the sea. The police, the municipality, all warning about the sea. They didn't warn us about the land at all. Those people living inland were abandoned [*labar*] completely.”<sup>26</sup> The warning was all about the sea, and those by the sea weren't hit at all.”<sup>27</sup> As the rain turned their inland streets into torrents, many of these Omanis lost their homes; others were swept to their death.

What may have been the meteorologists' failure to take Oman's geography and geology into consideration in the early-warning plans resulted in a misunderstanding of the event as merely oceanic in nature.<sup>28</sup> It was the rain and the torrents it made that killed people in low-laying areas, not the waves. Despite claims by officials within the Omani

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<sup>25</sup> Maryum al Wahibi, “a05haj002,” Interview by Mazin al Baluchi, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann.

<sup>26</sup> According to my Omani translator, the word choice here denotes a sense of being abandoned, as the word used to modify being left, is *labar*. This is a word specific to the local dialect within this part of Oman. Likely recognizing the term's obscurity, the Omani who had originally transcribed this interview included in their notes the better-known Arabic word, *bil mara*, from which this local term is derived.

<sup>27</sup> Ali al Wahaibi, “a05mur002,F” Interview by Mazin al Baluchi, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann.

<sup>28</sup> Subsequent studies of flash-flooding in Oman have noted that the country has a kind of rocky terrain that is less porous than found in most other countries. This makes the land more vulnerable to flash flooding after rainfall. For example, see Ghazi Ali Abdullah al-Rawas, “Flash Flood Modelling in Oman Wadis,” PhD Diss. University of Calgary, 2009. Flooded streets are a common sight after a small amount of rain, and often become a space for play as Omanis watch the rushing water, or try to ford it with their 4X4s. The darker side of this trend is that many people are swept to their deaths when they play in the rushing water, or get caught in the very thin and deep canyons that in dry weather are immaculate hiking paths, but quickly fill up with rushing water killing entire hiking parties at once. Hence, in the name of promoting public health, state authorities have begun to regularly remind people to avoid *wadis* after rainfall.

meteorological authority that they did warn people of flashfloods through the TV and radio stations, that the problem was that people did not listen,<sup>29</sup> many victims of Gonu saw their plight as evidence of failure or neglect of their government.

The death count of the storm was another subject of criticism. To this day, Omanis do not know how many died from Gonu because the official death count was frozen at 49 two weeks after the storm. No other official numbers have been made public, but it is regularly regarded as a fraction of the real toll.<sup>30</sup> A cable from the US Embassy shows that their own investigations through contacts with the Royal Omani Police and the hospital morgues put the number at several hundred. This number includes many south Asian construction workers—a particularly vulnerable group of people due to their camp-like housing quarters, and whose plight received minimal coverage in both the national media and the oral history project.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence of this government propaganda, Omani citizens are left to speculate about both the human cost of the destruction and the government’s motivation for suppressing it. In her interview with the oral history project, a university student from an area hit hard by the cyclone expressed her frustration and confusion over the official death count:

There was one Indian man who came and told us, he said: “30 people us [*sic*] die.” And we said 30?! What do you mean 30, while they are saying 49 died in the entire country? And in one [construction] company, you’re saying 30 people

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with the Author, July 25, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Valeri reports an official count of, “around 80 people... [dead] or missing at the end of 2007,” but notes that an Omani official privately reported to him 200 casualties, and that expatriate contractors regularly spoke of 500. See Valeri, *Oman*, 126.

<sup>31</sup> For the US Embassy’s numbers, see Embassy Muscat, “Oman Three Weeks after Gonu,” Wikileaks Cable: 07Muscat654\_a, dated June 27, 2007.

died? I don't know why they are being so secretive about it. But maybe it's politics, and we don't want to interfere there.<sup>32</sup>

Note how she attributes the official, deflated number to "politics," an arena in which she should not interfere. The act of censoring the death count thus teaches Omani citizens that it is not for them to know, or publically discuss, the extent of the damage and death incurred by the storm, or the extent to which they might be in danger from future storms. This censorship thus prompts critical responses from the citizens when the Omani state attempts to construct the disaster as a manageable natural hazard, as it is never made clear to what extent the state actually managed Cyclone Gonu successfully.

The repeated complaints in the oral history interviews demonstrate that underneath the optimistic pomp in the uncensored media, there existed alternative, critical interpretations of how various authorities responded to the storm. Other individuals interviewed blamed the government for allowing residents to live in flood areas in the first place, and for not maintaining public infrastructure. For example, they blamed the Ministry of Housing and the Ministry of Municipalities for allowing people to build in hazardous areas, and for allowing the dam near their settlement to become clogged with debris.<sup>33</sup>

Whether in terms of the early warning, the inequality of recovery efforts, poor urban planning, and a lack of infrastructure maintenance, Omani civilians took the notion that Gonu was a technical problem for which the government was responsible for

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<sup>32</sup> Zakyia al Battshi, "a07dag001," Interview by Asma al Baluchi, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann.

<sup>33</sup> I am withholding the source and direct quote of this complaint because the interviewee had asked the oral historians not to record it.

managing, and spun a narrative of failed governance. In that sense, the destruction of Gonu was not just a humanitarian problem, but the sign of a larger crisis of authority. And this critique lived on to animate subsequent anti-government indignation. For example, the post-Gonu neglect of Qurayyat would re-emerge in four years as the focus of local protests during the nation-wide protests during the so-called Arab Spring. Speaking on behalf of the victims of Gonu, protestors called for municipal reform and an improvement to health and education facilities.<sup>34</sup> The image of the government as incompetent or corrupt managers would also be utilized in the aftermath of subsequent storms of smaller impact. For example, during my fieldwork in 2015, flash floods and a near-miss with a cyclone generated a great deal of official and social media coverage of the storm's approach and impact. One image that gained high circulation on Omani social media in 2015 during a flash flood was a juxtaposition of two photos of the same street, one flooded with bluish water, the other with brown. The caption sarcastically remarked upon the progress that the photos demonstrate, "Two pictures of Muscat in 1997 and 2015. Thank God for the different color of water." A pro-regime account, "Callings for Sultan Qaboos," rebutted: "Calm yourself sir. Our Oman was all dust, and after [Qaboos came to power], there is rain in every part. Your people are in good hands."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Benny, "Qurayyat Stir Ends on Peaceful Note," *Muscat Daily*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Stories-Files/Quriyat-stir-ends-on-a-peaceful-note/%28language%29/eng-GB>.

<sup>35</sup> alfarsi\_salim, Callings for Sultan Qaboos, September 6, 2015, Tweet.

### **Gonu as a Warning from God**

In addition to conceiving of Gonu as a predictable feature of nature, which human organization and technology could overcome or fumble, another framing of Gonu was prominent in Omani discourse. In this version, Gonu was a surprising, unmanageable event. Like the technocratic framing, official and dissident commentators utilized this version of Gonu to protect or attack the status-quo.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, immediately after the Omani government first warned the public of the on-coming storm, some Omanis began authoring a political narrative of the storm in online forums. One pattern in these posts was a theological interpretation of the storm, and to call for a national movement of Islamic piety.<sup>36</sup> On June 4<sup>th</sup>, one author wrote about how a hurricane (‘*aSar*), like drought, and earthquakes, is God’s punishment for nations (*al‘umam*) that are un-Islamic, indulging in luxury (*al tarafu*) and lawlessness (*fawdaa*). The post received an out-pouring of positive responses from others. Many of these responses consisted of stating agreement on the thread, asking God for forgiveness, and posting prayers on the forum itself. Others added their own specific gripes against the Omani government and society according to their interpretation of Islam. One author

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<sup>36</sup> The quick articulation of such a response might be due to the fact that the topic of Oman’s ecological destruction was still fresh in the public debate. In the preceding month, wide-spread rumors circulated that described a Pentecostal man named Raju George who reported to his church community, local business owners, and the police that he had a religious vision that warned that the posh Muscat neighborhood of Qurum would be flooded on May 7<sup>th</sup> of 2007. Although his vision was supposedly about a tsunami predicted to hit on that specific day, the story was later re-cast by some as an accurate prediction of Cyclone Gonu, a re-interpretation that was mocked by others. Author’s Field Notes, 7/25/16. The rumors are also discussed in online forums and discussion threads. For example, “alkhayimat altawthiqiat li’ahwal altaqs marjie likuli ma yakhusu altaqs wayashmal tawarikh alhalat aljawayat alty marat biha alsaltanat w dual alkhalij,” *Sabla ‘man*, June 6, 2009, <http://www.omanya.net/vb/showthread.php?t=45402&page=12>. For the mockery of applying his prediction retrospectively to Gonu see, “mo qal alsaaahir alhindu ean junu .....khabir eajl!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” *Sabla ‘man*, June 5, 2007, <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=42697>.

cites practices of adultery, sodomy, and usury (*riba*), the consumption of alcohol, the government's annual festivals, which had previously been boycotted by Islamic activists, and the government encouraging tourists to "strip naked on our shores and in our markets." Others saw Gonu as a warning for the accumulation of sin in Oman, rather than strictly a punishment. But the prescription was the same: restrict international influence on local culture. Meanwhile, one should repent, change their behavior, and encourage others, one's "brothers and sisters," to do the same.<sup>37</sup>

The Omani Grand Mufti himself, Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, amplified this theme in public and semi-public forums. Appointed by the Sultan to be the official representative of Islamic thought in Oman, al Khalili is normally a religious cheerleader for the regime's policies, advocating a moderate, non-sectarian version of Islam. However, eleven days after Gonu, the Mufti appeared on state television where he answered questions about how Muslims should respond to the storm. In his response, he delivered an Islamic criticism of the status quo. He drew an analogy between Gonu and stories in the Quran, wherein God destroys the villages of sinners. His message was that the storm was God's punishment for Oman.<sup>38</sup> This was in stark contrast to the normally positive, apolitical public discourse in Oman, which emphasizes national unity and avoids commentary on the regime. Al Khalili is reported to have also given a remarkable sermon that contributors to Omani internet forums entitled, "Alarm Bell," (*jaras*

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<sup>37</sup> For example, see "nasihat eajilat hawl al'iesar almurtaqab (samam aman ya aihbh)," *Sabla 'man*, June 04, 2007, <http://s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=42427>.

<sup>38</sup> See "aSar Gonu – alshaykh 'ahmad alkhilili - laylat 3 jamadaa al ththania 1428," Youtube, originally aired June 17, 2007, posted online May 14, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=188&v=TGv-MzT0tNg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=188&v=TGv-MzT0tNg).

*al'jindhar*). Here, he is reported to have cried while describing with great emotion his worry for the country. The authors on the forum quote him as telling an unusual story: a younger Omani confides to him a dream of being abducted by “a grey space ship that was being driven by two green men.” The aliens warned him that the wrath of God is approaching due to the sins of the people: fornication, homosexuality, places of alcohol, usury, and not listening the parents. The Mufti interprets the man’s story in retrospect as a prophecy of Gonu, insisting that the aliens were really angels, warning Oman about the cyclone as an impending punishment for these “mother of all sins,” going on to reference AIDS as a similar expression of God’s wrath.<sup>39</sup>

The Mufti later published a collection of his essays, written during this time period, in which a theological treatise appears, addressing the subject of natural disasters and the hubris of modernization. Not mentioning Gonu specifically, he avoids the scandal of direct criticism in this more public venue. But since he is writing in the months after Gonu, it would have been obvious to his Omani audience that he was commenting on Gonu. After providing a long list of quotes from the Quran illustrating the role of God in laying waste to villages of sinners, he closes this essay by highlighting the folly of humans who try to conquer their fate through their own powers: the building of the Titanic, the “unsinkable ship,” was an affront to God, and its sinking was a sermon onto the world.<sup>40</sup> That Gonu may be a similar sermon would not be lost on his audience.

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<sup>39</sup> On account of the alien story, Omani commentators on internet forums expressed doubt over the veracity of this sermon. In response, purported excerpts later appeared online, from which I am drawing. For these excerpts, see “samahat alshaykh 'ahmad bin hamd alkhilili fi sharit 'jrs al'iindhar' yahdhar min rawya,” *Sabla 'man*, June 13, 2010, <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=787058>.

<sup>40</sup> Samaha Sheikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, *al 'qal*, (Muscat, OM: University of Sultan Qaboos, 2008).



Other features of the Mufti's political subtext would also be apparent to an Omani audience. First, in Omani culture, several of the specific "sins" mentioned by the Mufti and these online Islamic commentators are clearly associated with the regime. The understanding is that the oil-boom that marked the beginning of the Sultan's rule caused an influx of non-Muslims into the country in search of work, and later, tourism. This transformation created a market for Western resorts that serve alcohol and host prostitution. This purportedly "foreign" sin is then on-hand to tempt Omanis themselves away from their pious lives.<sup>41</sup> Here, the Mufti is providing a reactionary narrative, rendering things like alcohol consumption as foreign, playing upon an undercurrent of resentment toward the economic successes of "expats."<sup>42</sup>

Regarding the fear of homosexuality in Oman, it is commonly speculated in private, an "open secret" by some accounts, that the Sultan has sexual relationships with other men. Second, as detailed in Chapter Three, the discourse through which the Sultan commands loyalty is premised upon the economic development that coincided with his regime, and the new sense of prosperity that Omanis enjoy in contrast to their previously impoverished subsistence living. By invoking the story of the hubris behind building the Titanic, and its eventual failure, the Mufti is making an analogy: the current prosperity of

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<sup>41</sup> A noteworthy omission in this conservative account of public vice as both new and foreign is that Qaboos' regime actually oversaw a conservative movement of Omani society towards Islamic piety. Among the many local traditions that this movement expunged was the production and consumption of date wine. For a more sustained discussion of contemporary piety in Oman, see Mandana Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> The political charge of this resentment would be made more apparent years later, as it shaped some of the activism within the later Arab Spring protests, most notably arson against a large, Indian-owned supermarket in Sohar.

Oman may be a fleeting triumph before a larger catastrophe, and Gonu is God's warning to turn back. Unlike the West's neglect of the sermon of the Titanic, it is not too late for Omanis to heed the call.

In these ways, the Omani commentators and the Grand Mufti himself are trafficking in politically charged frames that question the fruits of the regime's rule, and its potential folly as hubris in the face of God. To be clear, none of them appear to be decrying all of the modern trappings associated with the Sultan's rule. They are concerned with the ways in which the Sultan's rule has created violations of Islamic teachings. The Mufti's sermon and writings are what American readers might recognize as a "dog-whistle," implicating the Sultan's renaissance, and the collusion of everyday Omanis, as a cause of Gonu without explicitly saying so. In that way, these commentators are rendering Gonu as a crisis of collective morality, one that demands a return to Islamic values in the individual, the family, society, and in government policy.

Compared to the technocratic reading of the storm, this Islamic critique is more radical. The impetus to "recover" to protect life and property is rendered as being beside the point, so long as it does not address these collective sins. That is, while the technical rendering of the disaster places value in returning to the status quo, albeit with better technocrats in charge, the Islamic criticism renders the pre-Gonu society as being at the root of the problem. In this version, Gonu demands a more radical social and political transformation that imbues Omani laws, economic activity, and personal life with Islamic practices.

## **Gonu as an Un-planned Spectacle of State Power and National Solidarity**

In contrast to the public skepticism, disenchantment, and criticism of the regime after Gonu, various branches of the Omani government responded to the spectacle of Gonu's destruction by asserting their own narrative in public venues, often in response to the criticism. These venues included the state-owned media, internet forums, and statements from the Sultan himself. State-sponsored publications spoke of a "national epic" (*malhma watania*). Like the Islamic critique, the national epic circumvents framing the disaster as a technical problem to be overcome. Instead of discussing the storm as a feature of the climatic system to be predicted and mitigated by scientists and state agencies, Gonu is a surprising, extraordinary moment in which the entire nation rises to action and realizes its true character, hence the title of one official account of the event: "Gonu: Extraordinary *Anwa* ' [roughly, "Climatic Event"]... And Extraordinary People."<sup>43</sup> Unlike the Islamic critique, the diagnosis praises the status-quo: Gonu was a trial that God brought to the nation for it to prove itself, and learn lessons of hardship, hard work, and solidarity. Rather than divine justice for a sinful nation, Gonu was divine pedagogy. Rather than search for who or what is to blame for the destruction, the difficulties are simply to be endured collectively as a lesson. The Sultan put forward this epic framework in his national address three weeks after Gonu. According to him, the event (*anwa*'),

...proved, and thanks to God, the strength of this country. This abnormal time proved the power of the nation, and the solidarity and unity of its brothers, and their interdependence... Oh loyal citizens, we stand today proud and appreciating

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<sup>43</sup> My translation of "anwa'," as "climatic event" is problematic because the term has no set usage or meaning in this context. I address this later in the paper. The cited title is from Ahmed bin Khames al Balushi, *Gonu: Anwa' Istithna'iya... wa Sha'b Istithna'iya*, (Muscat, OM: Bank Muscat, Association for Vision in Journalism and Publishing, 2007).

the loyal efforts serving the proud, brave nation dedicated to helping and supporting... May God protect our country, and may God's grace last for Oman and for the rest of the countries in the world..."<sup>44</sup>

This national epic emphasizes the surprising, uncontrollable, theological character of the event. The solution it calls for is not a turn toward piety and religious leadership, as called for by the Mufti and his cohort. Instead, it requires patriotism, the leadership of police and military, popular participation in volunteering projects, and an overall appreciation and patience for the will of God in these hard times.

The Sultan later elaborated upon this narrative in a subsequent interview in a popular Kuwaiti newspaper. Explaining why he supposedly rejected foreign aid after the disaster, he explained,

We also wanted to test our strength in the face of such a disaster, our people were subjected to such a test and I tell you that we succeeded. Such a test has [woken the] people and the Omani nation whom... stood united as one and capable of discharging their duty. Unfortunately, there are some people who [interpreted] this disaster as God's punishment. Such people are [misinterpreting] Sharia... Let us take this issue as a warning from God so that people would understand that life is not always without hardships, and therefore, they should be prepared for all that is ordained on them and this is natural. We should always say, Thanks [to] God for what he has ordained and for his kindness. Such natural disasters in other countries are common... What happened to us may happen once or twice, we consider it [exceptional] if we [are] compared with others who are experiencing disasters annually or repeatedly. With a high level of national cooperation and sentiments we were able to face this disaster, and I was extremely delighted for the Omani people's cooperation with which we were able to overcome such a cyclone with believing hearts free from any panic, fear or chaos.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> I am thankful to Dola alGady Dee for her help with translating this video. Qaboos bin Said, "Words of His Majesty after *al-anwa' al-munākhia* 2007," Youtube, posted October 31, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsbDOyXGU8Q>.

<sup>45</sup> The interview was originally published on a now defunct website of *Oman Tribune*. Segments from the interview are still available at "India Booms, Inflation Rages," Muscat Confidential (blog), April 30, 2008, <http://muscatconfidential.blogspot.com/2008/04/>.

What is striking about this account is not just that he acknowledges his Islamic critics in public, but that he pushes against the idea that people can be protected against such storms in the first place. In other words, one might conclude from the triumphant language around Omani development that is normally associated with the Sultan's regime that such a storm is one more element of nature to be controlled under his leadership. But the Sultan is rejecting this contextualization of the storm within Oman's official narrative of progress. According to him, the fruits of Omani development do not mean that the state can provide life without hardship.<sup>46</sup> In his version, such storms are a natural part of earthly existence, and if God has a message for Omanis, it is that life can be difficult at times, calling upon "us" to be strong and unified in caring for one another. In short, Gonu is not a crisis that signals a need for some broader transformation. It is an affirmation of the status-quo, and a call to being better citizens within it.

State-owned and private media, along with everyday citizens, reproduced this nationalist sentiment in public. There was a great deal of spontaneous organization of thousands volunteers, in some cases led by state agencies, in others by para-state charities. In areas hardest hit, initially it was just families and neighborhoods helping each other. Many state representatives, journalists, and every-day people framed stories and images of these recovery efforts as embodiments of national solidarity and strength—demonstrations of the true Omani character, of "honor." They saw the spontaneous

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<sup>46</sup> Here, he echoes other liberal thinkers who, in the face of the "intractable regularities" of nature and human populations, advocate for using state power not to set the world according to the whims of human beings, but to understand the regularities and live in accordance with the nature of things. See Bruce Curtis, "Foucault on Governmentality and Population: The Impossible Discovery," 529. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 27, no. 4 (2002): 505-533.

aggregation of strangers helping one another as an embodiment of Oman's national strength.

Consider the following exchange between an Omani oral historian and a victim of the cyclone. He describes the arrival of Omani volunteers to his town in terms of national brotherhood, overcoming local and tribal identities, noting that help came from as far away as the Dhofar region—a ten-hour drive, and notably, the former hub of the separatist movement in the 1960s and 70s.

*Ma shallah*, in Oman there are some manly men of pride (*rijāl ghaira wa ḥamoa*).<sup>47</sup> You wouldn't say that this man [volunteer] is from *Badia* and this one is from *Imra*, they all stood together as one hand.

[Interviewer]: One nation?

Yes, yes, yes.

[Interviewer]: How was the help from different people?

The help we received came from *Ibra*, *Badia*, *Ja'lan*, *Kamil*, and *Wafi*, so the cars were abundant. Some cars were coming from Salalah [Dhofar]. They performed their duties and stood a manly stance, even the old men, they would come in cars and stop and say, "Come, take everything, it's all for you." And most people would want to drink water. Thank god, Oman has men, men with honor and blood, *ma shallah*. We didn't say this originally, we used to say, "No one loves the other," but now we say that we are one people, (*sh'ab wāḥid*), one nation, (*'uma wāḥida*).<sup>48</sup>

Consider also the various responses to the Sultan's decision to order the Omani border guards to turn away caravans of volunteers and supplies coming in from the UAE and

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<sup>47</sup> According to my Omani translator, this is the same phrase used to describe those men who perform honor killings, as an act of pride.

<sup>48</sup> Juma al-Araimi, "a02sur003," Interviewed by Ali al-Riymai, *Gonu Oral History Project*, Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University, August, 2007; translation by Noora al-Balushi and Tyler Schuenemann.

other countries.<sup>49</sup> To some, this decision was a mistake because Gonu was an emergency, requiring an immediate response from any who could contribute, including foreign countries. To others, it was an act of national leadership, giving Oman the chance to demonstrate that its citizens and its state institutions could work together and recover without the help of foreign aid. For this reason, several Omanis that I spoke with were shocked, felt “betrayed,” when I told them of leaked US Embassy cables that discuss the Omani government secretly accepting financial aid from other Gulf countries after Gonu.<sup>50</sup> When I asked why they felt betrayed, they referenced the pomp in the media and the Sultan’s speeches regarding Oman’s self-sufficiency in the recovery effort. Here is how one Omani put it to me:

I feel betrayed to hear that they [the Omani government] took [foreign] money, because they made a big show of it [rejecting aid], and there’s all this anti-Emeriti sentiment, the [rumors of a] secrete [Emirati intelligence] cell [in Oman]. It would be really annoying that they [the Omani government] played on that.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This story was told to me by many Omanis I spoke with. It also appears repeatedly in the transcripts of the oral history project. For example, “His majesty knew that we did not need to except any help from outside because he knew that Omanis are honorable.” See Ibid. This rejection of foreign aid is consistently talked about as evidence of Omani strength and independence from foreign influence.

<sup>50</sup> The *Wikileaks* cables from the US Embassy describe that the Omani government did initially reject all forms of foreign aid, but eventually opened up venues for individual donations in public, and later accepted money from other Gulf states in secret. They also show that the Omani government was steadfast in its refusal to accept money from the US and British governments after the storm. Embassy Muscat, “Oman Issues Cyclone Recovery Directives, Quietly Accepts Funds from GCC States,” Wikileaks Cable: 07Muscat596\_a, June 12, 2007, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MUSCAT596\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MUSCAT596_a.html).

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Author, June 15, 2016. The anti-Emirati sentiment is likely in reference to Omani suspicions that members of the ruling family in Abu Dhabi wish to absorb Oman into the UAE. See Peter Salisbury, “Insulting the Sultan in Oman,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 19, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/19/insulting-the-sultan-in-oman/>; and Joel Schectman and Christopher Bing, “UAE Used Cyber Super-Weapon to Spy on Iphones of Foes,” *Reuters*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-spying-karma/>.

The story of Omanis able to support each other after such great destruction gave them pride, and the story of the secret foreign aid left them feeling manipulated.

Another notable feature of this attempt to narrate Gonu as a national epic was a conceptual innovation. With the help of the Ministry of Information, the Sultan's post-Gonu speech introduced a new word into the Omani lexicon. When the Sultan gave his national address after Gonu, he said in Arabic that, "God had it that our fate was to go through this *al anwa' al munākhia*." Then he went on to praise the strength and solidarity of the nation in the face of this thing.

This term, *anwa' al munākhia*, was accepted by some as the new, proper way to discuss the event, especially in official discourse, but also in some critical media coverage.<sup>52</sup> Since the speech, *anwa'* and *anwa' munākhia'*, the latter word modifying *anwa'* as a "climatic *anwa'*," have been used in official Omani sources as synonyms for cyclones, especially in media and books about the storms.<sup>53</sup> However the Sultan's new term was also met with confusion, criticism, and some mockery by everyday Omanis, and these responses tended to fall within the two dissident framings of Gonu discussed above.

If the national epic was the government's response to public and semi-public dissent after Gonu, then these patterns of response to the term "*anwa*" reveal a kind of third phase in the framing contest, showing how Omanis critically engaged with the state-sponsored frames and the narrative of the national epic. One pattern of response draws from the technocratic framing of Gonu. It renders the Sultan as a bumbling manager who

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<sup>52</sup> This was the case in the previously discussed news article exposing the "crying out" of a coastal town after the "*anwa'*."

<sup>53</sup> For example, the aforementioned source that renders Gonu as a "national epic," is entitled "Gonu: Extraordinary *Anwa'*, Extraordinary People [*sha'b*]." See Ahmed bin Khames al Balushi, *Gonu*.



does not know what he is talking about. In this case, some Omanis claim that the term is actually a blooper, where the Sultan mispronounced a similar-sounding meteorological term in his speech. They claim that since he is the Sultan, everyone has to just pretend that this is the correct word from here on out, and as a result, it is now part of the lexicon of official reporting on cyclones in Oman.<sup>54</sup> There is indeed another Arabic word, “*ajwa*’,” which when paired with the same modifier above, “*munākhia*,” means “climatic condition,” and is sometimes used to refer to a weather forecast. So the Sultan’s sentence would have made sense in context by switching out *anwa*’ for *ajwa*’. This was a plausible explanation for Omanis unfamiliar with the history of pre-Islamic and Islamic astrology in which “*anwa*’” does appear, which is of course most people. The context of the well-known legal and social sanctions against any criticism of the Sultan, only reinforced the plausibility of this interpretation.<sup>55</sup>

A more commonly reported explanation is that the term was *deliberately* innovated by the Sultan. There are various explanations for why he would do so. One version has the Sultan trying to put a positive spin on things. This explanation seemed plausible to some Omanis because it would not be the first time that such top-down linguistic engineering occurred. In Oman, there are both top-down and more diffused social pressures to keep public conversation optimistic and polite. Regarding the top-down, there are precedents where, for example, the Sultan insisted on not calling people without jobs “unemployed,” but instead, “job seekers” in order to make them feel

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<sup>54</sup> I was told this explanation in person. Versions of it also appeared in popular online discussion forums around the time of the Sultan’s speech.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see Human Rights Watch, “Oman: Prison for Online Critics,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 21, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/21/oman-prison-online-critics>.

empowered to eventually “have something,” to not be “in stasis” or “dead.” This example was cited by Omanis trying to explain the emergence of *anwa*’ as another instance of the Sultan’s belief in the power of positive thinking.<sup>56</sup>

However there are reasons to doubt that this innovation was due to pressures for optimistic language. When I asked Omanis about the meaning of *anwa*’, many did not know the word to begin with. Those who did, on account of their memories of cyclone Gonu, did not see any positive or optimistic connotations with it. To them, it was a word that is alien to their lexicon, something formal or old, being imposed on them from above. Indeed, it was.

Hence another explanation that Omanis give for the innovation is that the government needed to create a new word for a new problem. The public discourse around Gonu repeatedly stated that the storm was the first of its kind to hit Oman, and thus, as a new phenomenon it required a new name. Some Omanis were annoyed with this innovation, making comparisons with other, equally strange instances when the Sultan tried to manage the public lexicon, like the “job seekers” example above, or his proclamation that tribal names now need to be gender specific for the sake of cohering with what many Omanis consider to be overly formal grammatical rules in high-Arabic.<sup>57</sup> Some responded with mockery and hostility to this innovation. Jokes circulated about

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<sup>56</sup> For example, when answering someone’s question in an online discussion forum as to the meaning of *anwa*’, one Omani stated that it is an official term used to replace “cyclone,” *i’ṣār*, because “cyclone” can stoke panic. Faris al-Hijaz, “mutāb’a ākhar mustajidāt al-ṭuqs fī baḥr al-‘arab wa al-sultāna lil mūsum al-‘awal li’ām,” *Sabla ‘man*, May 30, 2011, <http://avb.s-oman.net/archive/index.php/t-1158584-p-10.html>.

<sup>57</sup> The idea is to have last names follow the same grammar as adjectives that describe feminine objects or people. According to this rule, a woman named Fatma of the Baluchi tribe would need to add an “a” to the end of her tribal name, making her “Fatma al Baluchia.”

*anwa*’ on social media, while participants on online forums derided the term as redundant. For example, one writer expressed distain for the government’s attempt to use a word other than “cyclone” (*i’ṣār*), “It’s *i’ṣār* [not *anwa*]... *i’ṣār*. This is the word [for cyclone] whether the government likes it or not.”<sup>58</sup>

Other Omanis believed that using the term was part of the Sultan’s overt attempt to use his authority to squash the politicized, Islamic rendering of Gonu. Indeed, as quoted earlier, the Sultan used an interview with a Kuwaiti journalist to publically denounce such thinkers, but without naming names. Islamic critics responded with theological citations to challenge the Sultan in internet forums. One participant raised the possibility that calling the event “*anwa*” makes one an infidel because it is associated with paganism in Islamic teaching. In a condescending tone, he states,

Of course, some support the use of the word [*anwa*] because it is from the government. Supporting and not rejecting it is required... As for those who refuse the word, [they do so because of] the fear of God, and the fear of being an infidel due to this word, since the messenger of God hated/disliked (*krāhu*) rainmaking (*al istamṭār*) from *anwa*’.<sup>59</sup>

He goes on to quote a Hadith as proof: the Prophet Mohammad wakes in the morning after “an impact in the sky.” The Prophet then says,

I woke up and there were believers and infidels. The believers were those who attributed our rain to the favor and grace of God, and the infidels attributed it to the planet (*kaowkab*). As for those who say our rain is from *nwa*’ [the plural of *anwa*] they are infidels believing in the planet (*kaowkab*) [as opposed to God].<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> ‘az al-Arab, “al-*anwa*’ al-munākhiya: kalima t’udy ily al-kafar bil allah fa hdhar.” *Sabla ‘man*, November 2, 2007, <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/archive/index.php/t-97406.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Sheikh Abdul Rahman Asheim, “ṣaharat kalima al-*anwa*’ wa ‘aṣbaḥat hadha al-kalima ḥadeth al-sā’a,” *al irshad*, February 12, 2010, <http://al-ershaad.net/vb4/showthread.php?t=1002>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

In response to this post, a Sheikh from the government's Office of Guidance and Preaching intervened, posting a response on the forum to give textual credence to the Sultan's use of the term *anwa*'. He argued that using the word itself does not make one an infidel. According to him, it is the causal story behind weather events that distinguishes a believer from an infidel. The Prophet denounced the use of "*anwa*'" because Arabs at the time believed that *anwa*' and the stars had their own spirit, giving *anwa*' its own separate power or agency to create rain. This is paganism and un-Islamic. Alternatively, monotheism means that God causes *anwa*', and then *anwa*' causes rain. Thus he concludes that it is not un-Islamic to appeal to *anwa*' for the sake of explaining weather events, so long as the events are put into the proper causal chain where God is rendered the initiator of the event.

### **Conclusion**

These debates over the source and legitimacy of using the term *anwa*', as well as the earlier wave of political renderings of the emergency, demonstrate that both dissidents and officials are responding to Gonu as an unplanned political spectacle whose public meaning has political power. They are treating the state's authority as if it rides on how the emergency is interpreted: what caused it, who is responsible for responding to it, and how much safety and support can Omani citizens expect from their government? As officials and the Sultan himself step into the framing contest, their version of events is not accepted as a banal description, like a weather report, but as a partisan shot fired in a larger cultural battle.

Beyond providing rescue, relief, and recovery, state and civilian organizations mobilize to give the event a political meaning. What emerged in this process of meaning-making is a framing contest to anchor the event to broader political agendas. Critics advocated clearing out corruption and negligence to make a better-functioning technocratic state, or clearing out public and private sin to make a more pious, Islamic nation-state. Unlike the previously examined cases in the US, the stakes of the battle were not necessarily over who will rule, as there was no viable alternative to the Sultan—no competing politician, political party, or social movement to seize power of the state. Nevertheless, these political entrepreneurs mobilized to try and change how state power would be used, and upon what values it would be evaluated. And like the US, officials responded with their own tale of a national epic. This consisted of an incoherent story about the value of an effective technocratic response, the limits of safety in a world of cyclones, and the extra-humanitarian value of national solidarity in the face of human suffering. That is, the expert's ability to predict and conquer, and the layman's ability to face up to such surprising, uncontrollable events were ennobled as markers of the national character.

## CHAPTER 6:

### CONCLUSION: REVELATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the fact that disasters are usually talked about as special times—“emergencies,” “crises,” “calamities,” etc., it has nevertheless become a trope of public discourse that these events “reveal” or “teach” us something about our “normal times.” For example, activists talked about how Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy *revealed* the pre-disaster poverty and government neglect. While some Omani citizens also spoke of government neglect, others insisted that Gonu *taught* them that “we are one people” (*sh’ab wāḥid*); the Sultan spoke of how, “This abnormal time *proved* the power of the nation...” More recently following the devastation of Hurricane Maria (2017), an editorial in the *Miami Herald* was typical of how people discussed the event. Entitled, “What Hurricane Maria *taught* me about the people of Puerto Rico,” the editorial is filled with laudatory, totalizing statements about “the people of Puerto Rico.” According to the author, the hurricane showed that they are: generous, desperate, dispossessed, kind,

industrious, and characteristically sunny. The article quotes a resident reflecting on the hurricane's aftermath: "No one separates us, in good times or in bad."<sup>1</sup>

Scholars critical of the status-quo have similarly used disasters as ways into seeing beyond the destruction. For example, Margaret Somers treats Katrina as a mirror through which we can better see what has become of American citizenship, what she calls the rise of "market fundamentalism."<sup>2</sup> Writer Rebecca Solnit treats disasters as moments where more authentic human relations are able to emerge because the disaster has removed the social and economic structures that normally represses them, if only momentarily. For that reason, she writes that disasters provide an "extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what is seen there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times, and in other extraordinary times. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage and ashes."<sup>3</sup> Tests, windows, mirrors—this trope that disasters show us truth demonstrates a commonly held suspicion that there is some important reality about political community that is hidden, ignored, or

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in these quotes added. Patricia Mazzei, "What Hurricane Maria taught me about the people of Puerto Rico," *Miami Herald*, September 26, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/weather/hurricane/article175307901.html>.

<sup>2</sup> According to this manner of thinking, those who do not produce economic value have become stateless people, undeserving of the equal recognition that previous notions of social welfare –citizenship had provided, such as those introduced under the New Deal for white people, and expanded upon for racial minorities in the Great Society initiative. Market fundamentalism stripped the urban, African American poor of their moral worth, such that tending to the levees, or carefully planning an evacuation was not a priority for government agencies, nor was funding such agencies a priority for the administrations which oversaw them. See Margaret Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship*. For an argument in favor of treating disasters as natural experiments for social inquiry, see Charles Fritz, "Disaster," in *Contemporary Social Problems*, Merton RK and Nisbet RA eds., (New York City, NY: Harcourt, 1961), 651-694; as cited in Hans M. Louis-Charles, "State Sovereignty and Natural Hazards: A Study of the Legacy of the United Kingdom's Imperial Practices and Disaster Management Activities of Their Island Possessions," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Delaware, 2016, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, (New York City, NY: Penguin Books, 2010), 6.

perhaps just unclear during “normal times.” It follows that as disasters strike, one has to look past the immediate spectacle of destruction to see or hear the larger message, the greater insight.

But disasters do not by themselves “reveal” anything, at least not in the sense that they uncover social facts that were there all along, waiting to be discovered and inform a political agenda. This dissertation has argued that many of these claims as to the revelations of disaster are actually shots being fired in what are ongoing political battles. If we wish to understand the kinds of politics that disasters make possible, then we cannot assume that the practical problems of suffering and destruction, and therefore the institutions of disaster management that would keep us safe, are people’s central concern.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I have examined public meaning-making around disasters, finding a much broader set of concerns and visions for the common good.

Like the chicken and egg, there is a kind of co-constitutive relationship between people’s historical circumstances and how they understand and work to shape their membership within a political community. This dynamic applies to how Americans and Omanis make sense out of disasters. In the context of the US and Oman, new discursive frameworks of citizenship and national emergency helped to make disasters political spectacles today. Actors now compete to use these spectacles in their broader agendas to change or reproduce the status quo. I do not mean to suggest that disaster politics in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Beck makes such an assumption with his risk society thesis. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, translated by Mark Ritter, (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 49. I address this thesis later in the chapter.



US and Oman are identical, but that in spite of their different regime types, they share more in common than current scholarship recognizes.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding how political contexts shape disaster politics and vice-versa is more than just a scholastic inquiry into political and environmental change. There is a great deal at stake in these dynamics for those who worry about the dilemma between, on the one hand, the values and institutions of democracy, and on the other hand, the need to protect people from these ecological calamities. For example, several scholars warn of a kind of authoritarian drift toward technocracy as we increasingly rely on experts to understand and address the political problems that ecological threats pose. They worry that anxieties over our lack of safety will trump other public values, driving us to abdicate to a rule of experts.<sup>6</sup>

Environmentalists also have a great deal at stake over how societies respond to the disasters. They hope that climate-related disasters can push societies past the cultural barriers to environmental reform. They point out that “climate change” is an abstract concept. It is something that is happening slowly and above our heads. We cannot see it or touch it. So it is hard to mobilize a political movement in response to it. As one writer points out, unlike the scientific and political campaign to expose and answer the dangers of smoking tobacco, environmentalists have a harder time connecting the dangers of

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<sup>5</sup> Some scholars attribute the form of disasters politics to regime characteristics. For examples, see Sorace, *Shaken Authority*, 40-41; and Platt, *Disasters and Democracy*.

<sup>6</sup> Hewitt, “The idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age,” 3-32; for an updated version of this argument in light of the subsequent rise of neoliberalism, see Alex de Waal, “An Imperfect Storm: Narratives of Calamity in a Liberal-Technocratic Age,” *Social Science Research Council*, June 11, 2006, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/an-imperfect-storm-narratives-of-calamity-in-a-liberal-technocratic-age/>.

climate change to personal experience. Many of its victims are harder to identify, and its effects less direct and immediate. The slow boil of rising temperatures is less personal than losing a loved one to lung cancer.<sup>7</sup> But events like hurricanes are not just tangible and personal, they are spectacular, drawing the concern of broad constituencies. Hence, environmentalists hope that such events can help people see the world differently. They are trying to render these storms as events that point beyond their own spectacle of destruction to a broken system that is carrying us toward oblivion. Their hope is that such events can help focus enough public attention and care that it galvanizes more support for massive social, economic, and political changes to arrest climate change.

In the following section, I provide a summary of the analytic concepts and arguments presented in the preceding chapters. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to putting this content in conversation with these aforementioned democratic and environmental concerns with the political possibilities and dangers that lie in our warming climate.

### **Summary of the Dissertation**

By comparing the US and Oman, I have revealed a trend that cuts across what initially look like very different contexts: public processes of meaning-making after tropical cyclones are becoming sites of political struggle between officials and dissidents. People are not simply treating ecological calamities as material problems to be solved

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<sup>7</sup> David Runciman, "How climate skepticism turned into something more dangerous," *The Guardian*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/07/climate-change-denial-scepticism-cynicism-politics>.

through aid or recovery efforts. They are also treating them as unplanned political spectacles through which the quality of government and the larger values underpinning the status-quo can be sized up by a national audience.

The second and third chapters of this dissertation address why we see this similarity across different cases. They argue that today's political spectacles of calamity were made possible by the emergence of new discourses of citizenship and emergency. These frameworks help constitute the political spectacles that attend disasters today. Hence, it was only after they were on hand that it became plausible for political figures to speak of responding to a cyclone's destruction as some kind of window into political or social facts, such as the standing of the government or the character of the nation.

A discourse of citizenship came to political prominence in the US and Oman, ennobling a specific set of ideas and practices that make the collective maintenance or improvement of people's quality of life synonymous with being a member of the political community. This new vision of the social contract made one's government and fellow citizens responsible for achieving or upholding certain standards of living. It has been used to ennoble the provision of such support for both the predictable, everyday needs of people, such as education, health care, and social security, and the unexpected, extraordinary needs of people, such as help in times of financial ruin or aid in times of disaster. This new discourse of citizenship provided a way to understand the relevant social and political ties in times of disaster, by articulating a vision of solidarity and responsibility in which citizens could count on the national community and government to show up for them when calamity struck.

This new vision for citizenship became a powerful model for envisioning what it meant to be an American and an Omani through different means in each country. In the US, it was a gradual process. The American constitution included a charge for Congress to oversee the “general welfare” of the nation, which was sporadically upheld in federal-funding of disaster relief. But it was not until the late nineteenth century when we saw the Progressive movement popularize the notion of a significantly expanded federal government tasked with reforming or “improving” the lives of individual citizens. Politicians like Herbert Hoover and FDR capitalized on this development. Although they had separate visions for how these goals would be achieved, one through a synergy between private citizens and federal coordination, the other through centralized organization and expert rule, both campaigned on their ability to lead the nation in new programs that would improve citizens’ quality of life. Like government responses to disasters today, they did not just mobilize improvement schemes to change people’s material conditions. Hoover and FDR advertised these efforts, making the taming of rivers and serving the calamity-stricken symbols of their power and leadership. It was only then that large-scale disasters were regarded as moments for evaluating national institutions and figure-heads.

In Oman, it was in the mid-twentieth century when these new ideas and practices of citizenship became common ways for framing what it meant to be an Omani, and what the government would do for its people. Many of these ideas were institutionalized through the nation- and state-building process of Sultan Qaboos and his British allies, originating at a smaller scale in their counter-insurgency response to the Marxist, anti-colonial rebellion in the Dhofar region. The regime branded its rule as a new era, the

Omani Renaissance (*nahda*), characterizing it as a modernization effort that broke from the repressive, anti-modern rule of the previous Sultan. A big part of that modernization was implementing institutions and public values associated with a new social contract. Schools, hospitals, paved roads, and government-funded jobs would lift up Omani lives. Key to my investigation is how this brand of rule included changing how Omanis made a living, and through that, their relationship with the environment. No longer subject to the hardships of nature—a drought or a bad fishing season—the new Omani citizen made a living working in state-funded positions in the new rentier economy. In 1977, Sultan Qaboos expanded on the ecological implications of Omani citizenship when he ennobled the Omani military’s post-cyclone recovery effort on Masirah Island as a symbol of national power in the new, Qaboos-led Oman. Thus, it was through the branding of the Omani Renaissance that this new discourse of citizenship became central in Omani political culture. And like the US, this had ecological implications: part of what it meant to be a citizen was to receive support against the hazards of nature in both normal and extraordinary times.

As this new discourse of citizenship made it possible for disasters to appear as problems for political responsibility at the national level, the framework of “national emergency” made it possible to view these problems with urgency, and thus, a need for immediate, sometimes extemporaneous mobilization. For example, prior to Hurricane Katrina, the poverty, failing schools, and derelict public infrastructure of New Orleans was easily construed by activists as a miscarriage of justice under the new social contract. But such problems were also synonymous with the status-quo inequalities of the United States, receiving little national attention. Compare that to the spectacle of hungry,

displaced people surrounded by rising water in the Superdome of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. It was the latter problem that the mainstream national media and national political figures construed as a national emergency, demanding both immediate solutions by the government, and accountability as to why the Bush administration appeared unwilling or unable to do its job. While the discourses of citizenship ennobled by the earlier progressive and New Deal movements provided language through which the denizens of New Orleans could articulate their political grievances, it was only after their circumstances appeared as a national emergency by virtue of the hurricane that their suffering sparked a national mobilization.

History shows that this constitutive framework of contemporary disaster politics is relatively new. On account of their quick, sudden destruction to human life and the surrounding environment, a sense of urgency is characteristic of how people have responded to natural disasters. But it was only after the invention of new communication technologies that this urgency could be framed as a national emergency. With the telegraph, radio, newspapers, and television, these new mediums helped to create a constituency that included people who never feel the wind, rain, or seismic shakes in their own body, because they live far away, but nevertheless understand themselves as part of the event. National audiences can now learn about these problems in “real-time,” contemplating the urgency themselves and how they as an audience might intervene as volunteers, or how their government might intervene as the official guardians of the social contract. It is now possible for local “emergencies” to become “national” ones, wherein the actions of larger networks of civilian and official actors are implicated in the disaster response effort. In a context where solving such problems is seen as a key duty

of government, these emergencies are easily made into unplanned political spectacles wherein the capacity of the government to fulfill the expectations of citizens is thrown into question, creating an opportunity for dissidents and officials to compete over the meaning of the disaster. It is the historical convergence of these discursive frameworks of citizenship and national emergency that has made it possible for disasters to appear as the political spectacles that they are today.

This historical account of the US and Oman helps to correct an important part of how scholars understand the relationship between ecological calamities and contentious politics. Maslowians regard disaster contention as arising from a mismatch between universal psychological needs and government performance in emergencies. According to their model, insofar as the state fails in its primordial duties to provide for people's basic needs after a disaster, it faces a political crisis in which its popularity or even its power is threatened by a disaffected public. One could derive a dire forecast from such a model, wherein the growing power of disasters in a warming globe will inevitably outrun the capacity of governments, leading to unrest and government repression.<sup>8</sup>

But I have shown that mass suffering and destruction caused by disasters has only recently implicated the state. There is nothing universal or "natural" about how people politicize disasters. In the cases of the US and Oman, such activity is historically made through changing discursive frameworks that offer political meaning to disasters. In a sense, these findings corroborate Pell's insight that societal responses to disasters are

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<sup>8</sup> For an account of climate change causing such disorder, see Christian Parenti, *Tropics of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, (New York City, NY: Nation Books, 2011).

shaped by the pre-existing “social contract” of that place, a contract which is specific to historical context.<sup>9</sup> However, insofar as “the social contract” describes a singular, clear set of expectations for state responses to disaster, it does not correspond to the multiple, culturally contested meanings that constitute post-disaster framing contests today.

The fourth and fifth chapters of this dissertation examined these contests after large tropical cyclones in the US and Oman. They show how officials and dissidents have treated tropical cyclones as unplanned political spectacles over which they compete to give meaning in pursuit of their own political goals. One prominent form that these political spectacles take is that of a public trial, wherein national officials are judged according to their ability to respond quickly and effectively to the emergency. Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Sandy (2012) demonstrate how American dissidents and officials competed to support accusations and provide evidence in these public trials. For elite dissidents, such as the congressional Democrats during Katrina, these attacks took the form of publicly shaming the actions or platform of the Republican Party for failing to apprehend the seriousness and urgency that these disasters represent as national emergencies. Grassroots activists made similar points, publicizing the inequalities or absences of affective government recovery efforts, especially for the urban poor and African American communities who were being treated as “refugees” in their own country. Such trials were not unique to Katrina. Conservative and Republican leaders tried to frame Hurricane Sandy as “Obama’s Katrina,” while grassroots activists

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<sup>9</sup> Pelling and Dill, “Disaster politics,” 1-17.



attempted to highlight the gaps in the federal government's response to the disaster in spite of the generally positive media coverage of its efforts.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations made their own case to the national jury, and the story they told was actually two. The first conformed to the values of technocratic government. They emphasized their administrative competence and care in the face of the logistical feats of the emergency. But they also told a story that rendered the quest for guilt or innocence as beside the point. Their public statements emphasized the overwhelming, uncontrollable forces of nature, and the heroism of both first-responders and the civilian-laymen who, in spite of the enormity of destruction, nevertheless mobilized to serve their neighbors in need. Rather than technical problems for experts carrying out their duties, in this version of the disaster such events were tests of "the nation's" character. As such, the need of *civilian*-led volunteer efforts were not evidence of a negligent government, but a testament to the nation's virtue.

The aftermath of Cyclone Gonu (2007) shows a similar public trial over the performance of the Omani state. Despite the official and unofficial restrictions on speech critical of the government, Omanis after Gonu shared stories and images in public and semi-public forums that depicted the destruction of Oman's newly urbanized coastline, purported administrative errors in the state's early warning system, and state neglect in the recovery process. They also shared stories of mass casualties, casting skepticism on the official death count and speculating on the political motivation behind the low number. When Sultan Qaboos went on television to provide the official narrative of the storm, the novel word he used to describe the event, "*anwa*'," was regarded by some as a mispronunciation of a meteorological term, underscoring the perception of government

officials as bumbling and fumbling in their response to the disaster. This image of the Omani government failing in its capacity to protect civilians from disaster persisted into the years-long recovery effort. Four years on, Gonu was still a symbol of government neglect to some activists. When the Arab Spring protests in the region were inspiring Omanis to launch their own sit-ins, residents of a coastal town heavily damaged by Gonu used the occasion to take to the streets. On behalf of Gonu victims, they demanded political reforms at the local level, and better education and health facilities.

In some cases pre-empting and in others defending against these accusations in the public trial, the Omani government mounted a political campaign in the language of technical proficiency in the aftermath of Gonu. Officials upheld the suspiciously low death count. State-controlled media flooded Omani televisions with images of Omani helicopter rescues and aid convoys, while reporting that the government was turning away relief caravans from the neighboring United Arab Emirates because, they claimed, Omanis were capable of national self-sufficiency. Conspicuously absent from the coverage were things that might damage this image of disaster expertise, such as stories of the destitute Omanis living outside of the capital and drowned migrant workers in washed-out labor camps.

Like Presidents Bush and Obama, the Omani officials also told a parallel story of national heroism that circumvented the discourse of the public trial. They emphasized the surprising-but-natural character of the suffering and destruction. Rather than a government that can offer or fail to provide safety to its population, in this narrative the state's role is to participate in the larger effort among civilians to weather the storm with dignity and solidarity. Hence, they framed civilian and military relief efforts as

embodiments of the nation's strength, unity, and piety across Oman's diverse tribal, regional, or religious lines. As such, the government was not there to provide a service, but to join and give public recognition to the heroism they attributed to the spectacle.

Dissidents in both countries also offered accounts of the disaster that went beyond concerns with technocratic effectiveness, questioning the larger values and social arrangements that define the status quo. After Katrina, activists contested the appropriateness of relief efforts that did nothing to address the pre-hurricane poverty and racial discrimination, or the ongoing neoliberal efforts to reduce government support for public spending during "normal" times. Dissidents used the spectacle of the disaster to draw national attention to the systemic neglect of New Orleans' African American community whose suffering, by virtue of the disaster, was only now viewed as deserving of urgent redress from national actors. The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy shows a similar story. Activists who mobilized relief projects used their media spotlight to challenge disaster recovery conventions: they echoed the message of post-Katrina activists that emergency mobilizations must address pre-existing racial and class inequalities. They also attempted to frame the disaster as a symptom of the status-quo, rather than an aberration from it. In their account, the destruction of Sandy is the outcome of capitalism and climate change. As such, any attempt at recovery would be a farce if it does not address these systemic threats.

Members of Oman's religious-right also used the disaster to question the fundamental values and institutions of the Omani status-quo. From anonymous contributors to popular online discussion forms, to the Grand Mufti himself, they advocated for an Islamic reform of Omani society, implicating the Sultan's brand of rule

in its sins. In their eyes, any celebrations of civilian or government feats in “overcoming” the cyclone was blasphemy, hubris in the face of God. The cyclonic destruction was God’s work, and one does not overcome God. One submits to him. For these critics, submission consisted of rejecting the public sins on hand due to Oman’s recent economic transformation under Sultan Qaboos. Like the social justice activists in the US, albeit in a reactionary framework, these critics offered a radical critique of the status-quo. They used the popular concern brought by the disaster to circulate the message that merely rebuilding houses and infrastructure misses the root problems facing the nation.

I make no claims as to the generalizability of these findings. It would be a mistake to infer from these case studies that disasters will become unplanned political spectacles in all societies wherein similar discursive frameworks of citizenship and national emergencies are available. It may be true that virtually all contemporary societies have significant access to the communication technologies that make it possible to think in terms of national emergencies. It may also be true that all “modern states” engage in some versions of statecraft that appear to pursue the goals of welfare provision, social regulation, and social insurance—albeit to varying degrees.<sup>10</sup> But one cannot conclude from these trends that disasters will be made into unplanned political spectacles everywhere, because the availability of a framework does not dictate that it will be used,

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<sup>10</sup> David Garland, “The Rise of Risk,” in *Risk and Morality*, Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle, eds., (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 61-62; Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990); François Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-52.

and what it will be used for. Recall that the American constitution made Congress responsible for overseeing the nation's welfare, and congressmen in the nineteenth century occasionally cited this passage to justify providing aid to disaster victims. But there were plenty of disaster victims who were refused aid, and this did not generate a political scandal, as if the social contract was being violated. The discursive frameworks of citizenship and national emergency are constitutive to the unplanned political spectacles studied here, but they did not causally determine them. Anyone wishing to understand the kinds of politics that disasters make possible in other places will have to look at the processes of public meaning-making. The available frameworks provide discursive resources to people in this process, but they do not script it.

My analysis of these contemporary attempts to politicize tropical cyclones in the US and Oman helps to correct other features of disaster contention scholarship. Would-be activists are not simply reacting to social facts, like how well the state fulfills its duties in meeting basic needs. They are trying to shape the meaning of an unplanned political spectacle. Much of the political activity surrounding disasters actually centers on what gets taken as fact and what those facts mean to the public. Moreover, activists and officials are using the spectacle to do more than address the immediate needs of disaster victims. Recognizing this helps us see an arena of competition over meaning-making that takes place across regime-types. Just as these governments use the symbolism of providing for disaster victims as a propaganda tool, so too are dissidents using the purported absence of such provision as a sign that something is rotten with the status-quo. Today's officials are attempting to shape how their civilian audiences understand the calamity in order to shape how they understand their government. Likewise, dissidents

are seizing upon disasters as opportunities to spread to a national audience their own message against the government or the status-quo, in some cases rendering “recovery” itself a farce insofar as it neglects what they regard as root problems such as capitalism or public sin. Thus, contests over public meaning-making and the discursive frameworks that shape them are central to understanding the kinds of politics that such disasters impel today in the US and Oman.

### **Emergencies and Opportunities**

While I make no claims as to the generalizability of these findings, they nevertheless speak to concerns beyond the cases examined here. Many influential scholars of natural disasters have warned of the authoritarian nature of ecological emergencies.<sup>11</sup> One strand in this literature focuses on what Ulrich Beck describes as the emerging “risk society.” Writing in 1986, Ulrich Beck popularized this warning not in reference to global warming, but to a conglomeration of ecological side-effects that follow industrialization. This included chemical spills, air and water pollution, the depletion of the ozone layer, the unknown effects of GMOs, and the dangers of nuclear radiation. He warned that we are entering a new phase of modernity, wherein societies are forced to encounter the byproducts of the industrial revolution. According to this literature, we are increasingly encountering complex hazards that threaten our survival. Unlike the disasters of old, these hazards are global in scope, so complex and largely

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<sup>11</sup> However, some appear to embrace it, openly advocating for international, top-down social engineering with a heavy hand to eliminate fossil fuels from the global economy. For example, see Ted Nordhaus, “The Empty Radicalism of the Climate Apocalypse,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, (Summer 2019): 69-78.

invisible to our everyday life that we may need to move toward technocracy for the sake of survival.<sup>12</sup> Beck argued that such a society shifts the aspirations of citizens, as well as their understandings of justice: “The dream of the [pre-risk] class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be spared from poisoning.”<sup>13</sup> Under such circumstances, the role of scientific and managerial authority expands to such an extent that ideals of democratic accountability and participation are thrown into crisis.

While several scholars see disasters as nudging societies along this path to technocracy, Beck speculated that there might be an opportunity in these events. He pinned his measured hopes for democracy on the ability of everyday people to have direct experience with the hazards that threaten them, so that they may judge for themselves and not rely on experts.<sup>14</sup> The citizen-as-layman needs opportunities to experience the threats, as in a disaster, in order to participate in governing risk.

My findings show that while ecological emergencies might prompt some to look to experts to make urgent political decisions on their behalf, such a move presumes two things that are not actually given. First, it presumes that people have experts on hand whom they trust. But that assumption does not seem to hold in many cases of national emergencies that I have examined here. In fact, the cases often show that the opposite can happen. Who counts as an expert worthy of such authority was contested, and those

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<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Problems in the Age of Risk*, 183-184.

officials charged with emergency response were subjected to intense public scrutiny. They often faced charges that they were inadequate to the immediate task at hand, or irrelevant to it because the root of the problem was beyond their reach. Second, abdicating power to technocrats also presumes that safety, the public good that technocrats provide, trumps all others. Yet my cases show a much broader universe of public concerns. Just as the threats posed by global warming instigate discussions around how to find safety in the face of complex threats, ennobling the values of technocracy, they also provide a powerful platform for radicals to call for changes to the status-quo, often doing so by appealing to public values beyond safety. Examples from the cases I have examined include piety, national solidarity, and addressing pre-disaster racial and class inequality. Thus, the emergencies brought by climate change are more politically promiscuous than is recognized in the warnings about the rule of experts.

This promiscuity means that we should view natural disasters as potential opportunities and dangers, insofar as they are treated as unplanned political spectacles. They are not merely pathways to any single political future. Indeed, history tells us not just how things have changed, in this case, how we got to a place where such different countries share similar disaster politics today. It also tells us that our future is open to new possibilities.<sup>15</sup> As ecological calamities are slated to become more frequent and severe due to climate change, it is not a forgone conclusion that they will merely generate efforts to meet basic needs and return things to “normal,” safe times, as a kind of

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I am indebted to Foucault’s work on genealogy. For his comments on the “liberatory” elements of genealogy, see Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 164; and Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 82-84. For helpful assessments of Foucault’s approach and its liberatory goals, see Mark Bevir, “What is Genealogy?” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2, 2008: 272; and Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 188-189.



humanitarian conservatism. Nor is disaster contention determined by a singular, pre-set “social contract” or authoritarian “emergency” thinking. Disaster responses have become political spectacles in which today’s partisans compete for popularity and cultural influence to shape the public conversation about what kind of world we want to build in the wreckage. Indeed, many activists are using these spectacles as occasions for bringing the status-quo under public scrutiny—both the authorities and the values through which we evaluate them.

Against the purported ties between disasters and humanitarian conservatism, between emergency and authoritarianism, my findings suggest a more contingent, messier, contested field of public meaning after disaster. “Disaster capitalism,” a phrase coined by Naomi Klein in her influential 2007 work, *The Shock Doctrine*, refers to a political strategy in which neoliberal reformers take advantage of exogenous shocks, including natural disasters, to implement privatization policies that otherwise would not have been possible under normal circumstances. Yet Klein closes that book with descriptions of counter-forces to disaster capitalism, including “direct action reconstruction” efforts after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in 2005.<sup>16</sup> In chapter four, I have similarly showed how Hurricane Sandy was also occasioned with organizing against disaster capitalism, among other targets.<sup>17</sup> What her

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<sup>16</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 464-466. Her later journalism and advocacy continues to highlight this dynamic between disaster capitalism and the politicization of civilian-run relief efforts. For example, see Naomi Klein, “Puerto Ricans and Ultrarich ‘Puertopians’ are Locked in a Pitched Struggle Over how to Remake the Island,” *The Intercept*, March 20, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/20/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-recovery/>.

<sup>17</sup> I provide a more thorough account of Occupy Sandy’s organizing elsewhere. See Schuenemann, “Making and Scheduling Citizens,” 87-108.

work does so well is it shows that disasters are being seen by political actors as opportunities for political change. But while she characterizes these efforts as being primarily driven by elite, neoliberal reformers, against which grassroots activists must then react—playing defense—this dissertation has shown a broader cast of players and initiatives.

The meaning of disasters and the values through which people evaluate the response are sites of public contestation and therefore opportunities for change. In that sense, we should read post-disaster contention as a series of experiments and struggles to popularize new ways of thinking about who we are, who or what we can look to in the face of calamity, and the kind of world we want to build on top of the debris. The resonant depictions of national vulnerability in the media and in the streets, along with the attempts to address it collectively, instigate battles wherein political entrepreneurs find opportunities to frame the emergency toward a larger political agenda, putting pressure on the state to intervene in this framing contest. Rather than just holding states accountable to a pre-existing social contract, like the duty to provide for basic needs in the face of calamity, these mobilizations are spaces for political and social innovation. As global warming makes disasters more frequent and destructive, and we are confronted with scene-after-scene of human suffering and ecological devastation, the political spectacle of disaster is an opening for experimentation and mobilization behind new visions.

The variety of mutual aid and activist networks that emerged in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria (2017) are a testament to this potential. There, a negligent relief effort by the Federal and local governments prompted citizens to organize relief

efforts for themselves. Some of these organizations politicized their work, drawing attention to the larger problems of an inattentive government, economic injustice, and climate change, calling them “social emergencies.”<sup>18</sup> The effect of hailing the public this way may have been fleeting. But popularizing such a political reading of the disaster provided a framework that activists could pick up later, when evidence of government neglect returned. The leaked emails of Puerto Rico’s governing elite provided the occasion. They including denigrating remarks about those killed by the hurricane, sparking public outrage and mass protests that ousted Puerto Rico’s then-governor, Ricardo A. Rosselló.<sup>19</sup>

This contested meaning of disasters in public discourse should also inform environmentalists who seek to use such events to clarify the dangers of global warming to the public in hopes of mobilizing them as environmentalists. The sheer diversity of answers to the question, “just what is it that disasters reveal?” complicates the notion that they have the capacity to function as a spotlight, a test, or a corrective lens to make the abstract dangers of climate change visible.<sup>20</sup> In other words, disasters do not clarify or make tangible global warming. Environmentalists must do that. And in doing so, they

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<sup>18</sup> JunteGente, “Manifesto of Emergency and Hope,” June 2, 2018, <http://juntegente.org/en/manifiesto/>.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Pinchin, “How Hurricane Maria Fueled Puerto Rico’s Resistance,” *PBS Frontline*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-hurricane-maria-fueled-puerto-ricos-resistance/>; Patrician Mazzei and Alejandra Rosa, “Hurricane Maria, 2 Years Later: ‘We Want Another Puerto Rico,’” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria.html>.

<sup>20</sup> This argument also applies to the disaster studies scholarship that examines the conditions under which disasters can act as focusing events that allow state institutions to *learn* the right lessons about disaster mitigation. For example, see Birkland, *Lessons of Disaster*.

must contend with the frameworks on hand that shape people's understandings of disaster.

While national citizenship is being used as a discursive resource for articulating dissent in the face of emergencies, it may be a trap for environmentalists to the extent that this framework dominates public discourse after disasters. In the US and Oman, new visions of citizenship have made scenes of mass destruction and suffering, as well as the efforts to redress them, into potent symbols of shared *national* fate and interdependence. But what of the global nature of these threats, both their causes and who else they harm?<sup>21</sup> In the national framing, perhaps those harmed outside our borders are worthy of "charity," or capable of giving "us" aid when calamity strikes. But it restricts the language of shared fate and political responsibility to a particular territory in a way that does not correspond to what climate scientists tell us are the transnational interconnections that shape global climate change. There is a danger that this focus on the national community occludes other understandings of harm, interdependence, and responsibility that are also worth mobilizing behind.

Discourses of citizenship also contain the danger of scapegoating that environmentalists need to avoid. Born out of the promethean vision of modernizers who saw human organization and technology as capable of mastering humanity's fate, the visions of citizenship ennobled by progressives, New Dealers, liberal imperialists, and the Qaboos regime can hold such a grand vision of human agency that it lends itself to

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<sup>21</sup> For this reason, Ulrich Beck believes that cosmopolitan understandings of citizenship are necessary for addressing global risks. See Beck, "Cosmopolitanism as Imagined Communities of Global Risk."

mistaking structural problems for problems of leadership. It makes good sense to hold George W. Bush accountable to his decision to hand FEMA over to someone with no relevant experience. But, to give just one example, a great deal of Katrina's initial destruction and suffering can be traced back to generations of human settlement in hazard-prone areas, itself driven by systemic forces that have been beyond the control of any politician.<sup>22</sup> Just as discourses of citizenship have the danger of depoliticizing our connections to those living across the border, it poses the same risk for intergenerational connections. Ensuring that future heads of FEMA are the best of experts will not fix the world we inherited. It will not prevent massive hurricanes from flooding New Orleans again. Iris Marion Young was correct when she warned against a vision of political responsibility that was ill-suited for addressing the historic and systemic forces behind such disasters.<sup>23</sup> The time frame through which we read these threats must be much longer, the chains of collective responsibility wider. If environmentalists wish to use the political spectacles of disasters to their own ends, then they must find ways to make the destruction represent a much broader slice of history, and therefore a wider collection of actors and institutions that are responsible. Somewhat paradoxically, they need to make the emergency appear as part of the so-called "normal times" both before the disaster and after the recovery.

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Cutter, "The Geography of Social Vulnerability: Race, Class, and Catastrophe," *Social Science Research Council*, June 11, 2006, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/the-geography-of-social-vulnerability-race-class-and-catastrophe/>.

<sup>23</sup> Iris Young, "Katrina: Too Much Blame, Not Enough Responsibility," *Dissent*, 53, no.1 (2006): 41-46.

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